





# THE NEW DECAMERON

# THE NEW DECAMERON

THE THIRD VOLUME, CONTAINING  
STORIES BY

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## A NOTE IN SUMMARY OF WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

*THE first two volumes of "The New Decameron" told of the departure from London of a party of men and women, participators in an unconventional tour through Europe under the guidance of Mr. Hector Turpin, organiser and inventor of Turpin's Temperamental Tours.*

*The members of the party formed the habit of telling stories at suitable moments of their journey, and ten tales each day were accounted a suitable and desirable diversion.*

*By the late evening of the second day they were ensconced in basket chairs on the terrace of a fine château in Northern France, listening to the last instalment of the second series of tales. The persons present were Turpin the Courier; Professor Barnabas MacWhirter-Smith; Father Anthony, a Priest; Mrs. Dane-Vereker, a Lady of Fashion; Mary Pennock, a Woman Doctor; Vivian Spencer, of the*

## SUMMARY OF WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

*Foreign Office ; Peter Brown, of Chelsea ; Henry Scott, of the Psychical Research Society ; Buck, a retired master-printer ; and Herrick, a minor poet. Miss Pogson, a Schoolmarm, and Amélie, the Lady of Fashion's French maid, had gone early to bed, and therefore escaped the fearsome and terrific happenings with which terminated the second volume of "The New Decameron." The pages that follow relate the sequel to those sensational events.*

## PART I.—THE TRAMP

A LONG a dusty road in northern France a lean, scarecrow figure ambled unconcernedly. It was a bright summer day and the sun shone hotly through dust-laden air on stretches of ploughland, caked to the semblance of dry porridge, on the grey untidy grass that fringed the road, on the indifferent isolation of a few gawky trees, pointing irregularly to right and left their bushy top-knots at the hard blue sky.

The ambling figure whistled as he walked—tunes from *The Mikado* and from *Véronique*—while at his heels bundled a black, exhausted dog whose family tree had years ago been chopped for firewood, leaving along the air a doubtful scent of promiscuous marriage and bends sinister.

Noting to his right a small coppice that promised shade and a soft resting-place on this so arid afternoon, the tramp struck off the road and, making his way over a field of short grass starred with scabious, entered the shadows of the little wood. The undergrowth was thick and he was glad, after a few yards of painful progress, to find himself at the edge of a small clearing, in the centre

of which long grass and flowering thyme clustered about a low mound. A single thorn grew by this mound, throwing on the grass a blue blot of shadow.

"Come on, Baba!" he cried. "Here's the place. We'll have something to eat."

And he slung his pack to the ground with a long sigh of weariness.

Certainly this retired and shady spot was a pleasant change from the tedious glare of the high road. The tramp chewed bread and cheese contentedly, throwing a scrap now and again to Baba, who lay at his feet watching with intent but patient eyes the progress of his master's meal. The grass was soft; the shadow cool and quiet; the steep slope of the mound was good to lean against. The meal over, the tramp lit his pipe and lost himself in drowsy reverie. Baba, flat on his side, his four legs stretched out in absolute abandon of fatigue, wooed sleep and won her with the admirable dispatch of which all dogs—legitimate or otherwise—possess instinctively the secret.

There is a state, half-waking and half-sleeping, when realities have the mistiness of dream and dreams are vivid as the harshest truth. To the tramp's consciousness, bemused thus sweetly and thus drowsily, a sound of voices vaguely penetrated. They were distinct but oddly muffled, and the listener was grateful for both qualities in an interruption that might have mortified by brusquerie or tantalised by inaudible suggestion. He was too comfortable to worry whence they came,

## THE TRAMP

and yet awake enough to follow with aloof intelligence the meaning of their words. That they were English voices speaking English words, and that this remote coppice was in France, worried him no whit. Was he not English also? Besides, to the dreamer, race and probability are negligible trifles, and the tramp was too well at his ease to quarrel if twice four made nine.

"My opinion?" said one voice. "My dear Professor, we bureaucrats have *no* political opinion. We are forbidden. We have pensions and paper-clips, but no views of party."

A faint crackling of newspaper was the sole reply. The same voice spoke again.

"It is a week old, Professor, that *Daily Mail*. I understand even the current issues to be unreliable; those that are out of date must be singularly removed from fact."

"My excellent young friend," said another voice—thin and precise—"I have recourse to this journal solely on account of the absence of more congenial reading matter. I seek for no enlightenment on matter of fact. All facts were established by the ancients. I divert my mind, condemned otherwise through no fault of its own to—er—fust in me unused, with the petty squabbles of the age and the frivolities of public affairs. Hence my inquiry about Irish Government. Since, however, you are little less uninterested in that curiously uninteresting problem than myself, I have turned to another page of this obsolescent paper in search of some other subject, on which you will be pleased to enlighten me."



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During the silence that followed this elaborate oration the tramp edged himself a little farther from oblivion, a little nearer to actuality.

"Talks like a Professor!" he thought distastefully. "Is there no escaping the plague of education? Am I to be pursued all my life by grotesque figures symbolic of my past? At least the other is a bureaucrat. He said so. But even he may be an official of the Board of Education! As bad, if not worse. I am dreaming. This is a nightmare. I——"

The growing agitation of his mind sank to stillness at the bidding of renewed curiosity. The "Professor" began once more to speak.

# THE PROFESSOR ON BIRDS AND DREAMS

By BILL NOBBS

“ I PERCEIVE from this news-sheet,” he said—and a bout of paper-crackling, more intense than before, implied the folding, refolding, and flattening of the week-old number of England’s daily pride—“ I perceive from this news-sheet that an attack is in progress on the ‘ gilded popinjays ’ of our Foreign Office. It is evident the writer has formed for himself a most erroneous notion of the intelligence of birds, which is, I am persuaded, not infrequently of a very notable order.”

“ Quite,” replied the Bureaucrat. “ I remember how my Aunt Edith used to complain of a homing pigeon, which settled on her window sill in the mornings, while she was preparing for the day, and forced her to draw the blinds. It was a great inconvenience. The bird, she was never tired of assuring us, had a most *clever* face.”

The Professor was certainly less than interested in the observations upon Natural History of his companion’s Aunt Edith. Clearly, however, he

had the manners of the polite world, for he murmured urbanely, "I had not the pleasure of your Aunt's acquaintance," before he continued: "The popinjay, in especial, we have it on excellent authority, has been observed to display an astounding sagacity in circumstances of such a kind as demand it. There was once a gentleman of Great Britain, whose name——"

"Call him Mr. Smith," the voice of the Bureaucrat broke in hastily.

"If you please," said the Professor. "I was about to suggest it. This gentleman possessed a popinjay—which, my authority observes, is so designated either because it was the chief or noble jay or for some other reason—a popinjay of the bluest blood, which he loved tenderly and kept in a cage, whence he often withdrew it to caress. Being on his travels at one time, while overseas in the Holy Land the gentleman paid a visit to the mountains of Gilboa. Here, says my authority, is the favoured home of a large settlement of popinjays, owing to the remarkable freedom from humidity of the atmosphere. Popinjays, it seems, are peculiarly susceptible to moisture, finding it not merely injurious to health but sometimes actually fatal, and King David, as you are well aware, in his grief at the death of King Saul and his own friend, the heir apparent, in that locality, prayed that neither dew nor rain should descend upon it, being thus directly the cause of its suitability for colonisation by these birds. Our traveller, then, seeing a popinjay in the mountains of Gilboa and remembering his own pet, accosted

the stranger with the words, 'My popinjay in his cage at home sends you his greetings.' No sooner had the bird heard these words than it fell like a corpse. The gentleman was much distressed, and, having completed his tour, on his return home narrated to his family the events you have just learned. His popinjay listened with keen attention and the liveliest signs of concern, and with the conclusion of the recital collapsed from its perch in the pangs of dissolution. All present were overwhelmed with astonishment and grief, and the bird was carried into the garden in the hope that the fresh air might revive it. But no sooner did it see the opportunity it had gained by its assumed indisposition than it spread its wings and rapidly disappeared from view, with no thought of return, while its owner was left gradually to recognise, with some warmth of resentment, that the one bird had chosen a most ingenious method of communicating a plan of escape to its captive fellow-country—er—fellow-countryman, which the latter had shown great readiness of wit in grasping and adopting. For my part I do not see why so sagacious an animal should be used by journalists as a type of——"

"Thank you very much, Professor Macwhirter-Smith," said the Bureaucrat. "You cannot guess how much your story has interested me. I wonder if you would permit me, in my turn, to recount to you a somewhat peculiar dream, which my friends have often assured me is quite dissimilar——"

"My dear young man," replied the Professor, "I am aghast at your temerity. Can you be

unaware that any dream is now liable—nay, certain—to be construed in the most horrifying manner? Confess to me, if you will, burglaries or murders you have committed, but in the article of dreams allow me to persuade you to follow my own practice, which is, to memorise one or two useful dreams one may have read (but which the passage of time has rendered exempt from the operation of copyright) and to narrate *these*, with suitable intonation and gesture, whenever the opportunity offers. For instance,” proceeded the Professor rapidly, “when the worthy King Rupert was returning from Italy to Germany, with a large following of knights and other soldiers, there were in his train two nobles of the queer sort that is often found in such company. One came from Gronau, the other was called the Beringer. On reaching Switzerland, the whole party stopped to rest for a few days, and one night, while these two were dicing, they got so flushed with the game that the Beringer staked even his horse and armour and lost them, whereat he was so vexed that he commended himself to the Evil One and went to bed. The two lay in the same bed, and as soon as they had fallen asleep the Beringer had a dream. He dreamt that he was in France in the King’s Chapel, and there he saw a tomb covered with a golden cover and four golden candlesticks with tapers burning. The candlesticks seemed to him so fine that he thought, if he took only one, it would recoup him for all his losses. So he presently took one and went out. There he found his horse saddled and bridled, and he mounted

and rode off. Thereupon a great hue and cry arose and he was pursued by a crowd of people, who wanted to wrest the precious candlestick from him. So closely was he pressed on all sides that he must needs ride along a narrow lane, where was a gibbet with a man hanging, and, as he rode between the legs of the dead man, the dead man put his shins together and held him; and it seemed in his dream that one of the pursuers threw an axe, which struck him in the back, so that he fell from his horse and dropped the candlestick.

"When he had dreamt this far, he seemed to become aware of a pain so horrible that he woke up and cried out at the top of his voice, waking his companion in the bed and the others in the inn. They came with lights and he told them his dream, groaning pitifully, and showed them the axe sticking in his back; and the bed was full of blood, at which they were not a little afraid. At his request a priest was fetched and he was confessed and shriven. A few hours later he died in great repentance for his sins and was buried in the parish church at Tingen."

\*     \*     \*     \*     \*

By this time the tramp was fully awake and greatly diverted by the determination of the learned narrator to hold the hustings of conversation.

"There is certainly no holding the Professor," he thought, and chuckled to himself. "Think of him in a club smoking-room!"

The next moment, with its now familiar flute-

like quality and precision of utterance, the voice of the learned gentleman was again audible. He was remorseful.

"If I seemed just now to have interrupted you rudely," he said, "I ask your indulgence. I should be sorry to appear guilty of discourtesy, my good young friend. That your dream is exceptional, I am convinced; whether it is susceptible of polite interpretation, I am highly dubious. Therefore, in your own interests, to save you becoming a mere leading case, an instance of the schools, an illustration for callow Freudians, I adjure you to entertain me with some other tale, some happening of adventure or some romance of normal life that has impinged upon your notice, whether as a private citizen or—if I may say so—in your official incapacity."

The listener started as the shrill sound of a fretsaw at work struck on his ears. Then he realised the Professor had laughed. He settled more comfortably among the soft grasses. "What will the civil servant do now?" he wondered.

"Don't know any stories," was the sulky response of the Professor's good young friend. "Besides, telling stories reminds me of that damned fraud Turpin and the fix he has landed us in."

"You are impatient," said the Professor soothingly. "When you are my age you will welcome novelty in whatever guise she comes. I recall an occasion in Messina when novelty met me unexpectedly and almost violently in the narrow way. But I welcomed her, sincerely welcomed her. If you like, I will tell you——"

## THE TRAMP

The Bureaucrat, with desperate firmness, threw himself in the path of this further reminiscence.

“ Talking of Messina,” he said fiercely, “ I do remember a tale now. As a matter of fact I made it up. Wrote it a year ago, lost the manuscript, and found it in the lining of my Gladstone bag the evening we reached that infernal château. I stuck it in my pocket and here it is. I’ll read it to you. Are you ready? Then here goes. Incidentally it is about Sirene, not Sicily, but both begin with ‘ S.’ The story is called

### “ THE MIRROR ”

[BY COMPTON MACKENZIE]





# THE BUREAUCRAT'S TALE

## THE MIRROR

BY COMPTON MACKENZIE

I WENT south earlier than usual that year; the dream of an English midsummer night had become a nightmare, and I fled from it to the Island of Sirene, where, with nothing more material to worry over than the contents of a small valise and with nothing more urgent to vex my tired brain than a pocket edition of *Life's Little Ironies*, I sought heart's ease.

It was the time of the vintage, and every day I used to sit in the shade—or rather among the tremulous grey shadows of dusty olive trees, watching the women shuffle past, their arms and faces stained with the juice that oozed from the grapes tightly packed in the baskets they carried upon their heads. The weather was heavy, gathering slowly for the welcome September rain.

So heavy was it that the traditional gladness of the vintage was overcast and, instead of Bacchic mirth and jollity, I perceived only the weariness of tired women pattering along with swollen ankles through the white dust, overweighted with their burden of grapes.

## THE BUREAUCRAT'S TALE

Before me the land ran down in terraces of dishevelled vines to a sea of palest blue, still lustrous and shining indeed, but withal so opaque that like the land it appeared weary of summer.

I tried to remember Shelley's stanzas written in dejection near Naples; but the words eluded me. In any case they would have been inappropriate, for I knew, though the exact phrases may have been escaping me, that the poet's Mediterranean was more limpid than this Mediterranean which I now beheld outspread before me.

I turned away from the sea and tried to lose myself in *Life's Little Ironies*. I have never turned the pages of that volume since, and as I look back on them now they seem each one to reek of the hot asphalt of a shadeless modern promenade. I see a concertina of lodging-houses behind whose crude lace curtains terrible events are enacted to the accompaniment of distant brass bands. "Life," I said to myself, "is not like this. This writer of tales rigs the thimble, loads the dice, his heroes and heroines are puppets whose wires he takes a malicious pleasure in twisting."

My friend Wickham walked by at this moment on his way to some ridiculous tea-party at Anasirene, and, knowing that his admiration for Thomas Hardy was illimitable, I took pleasure in demanding an agreement with my criticism.

"Surely character rather than circumstance," I said, "determines human happiness and human misery."

Wickham surveyed hesitatingly the loops of the road climbing up to Anasirene.

"You tempt me to surrender my tea-party and to argue with you here in the scanty shade of these olive trees. If I yield, the whole course of my life may be altered. Some wonderful woman, unknown, beautiful, and with not less than £2,000 a year, may at this moment be entering Mrs. Van Someren's loggia—some rare rich creature intended for me by character, robbed from me by circumstance."

"On the contrary," I retorted, "if you don't go to Mrs. Van Someren's tea-party, the determining factor will be your own laziness, and if you miss this chance—one in twenty million from what I have seen of Mrs. Van Someren's tea-parties—you will only have your own laziness to blame."

"Nevertheless," said my friend, seating himself beside me, "I can tell you a story, a perfectly true story, that might well be called one of life's little ironies, in which the moral——"

"Oh, if it has a moral," I interrupted, "keep the story for Mrs. Van Someren and her guests. I hate stories with morals."

"The only moral is that Thomas Hardy would tell the story much better than I can," said Wickham, and abruptly, without waiting for me to express my wishes, he began his tale.

"When I first came to Sirene about twenty years ago, the *facchini* were an even more important member of the body politic than they are at present. In those days there was no *funiculare*, so that all the luggage had to be carried from the Marina to the Piazza, not as now merely from the Piazza to the hotels in the neighbourhood or the

## THE BUREAUCRAT'S TALE 🍄

### THE BUREAUCRAT'S TALE 🍄

remote villas of mad foreigners who build their abodes on the edge of inaccessible cliffs. Even to-day you must often have noticed what a class apart *facchini*, male and female, form. They rarely marry outside their own guild; they drink together, eat together, quarrel together, and rob together. Most of them have bad tempers, which is not surprising when one comes to think of carrying a grand piano a mile and a half in the Sirene sun along a steep, narrow, crooked, and badly-paved path. In those days their tempers were even worse, for they had to carry everything up three or four hundred steps from the Marina to the Piazza.

"At this date there lived in a shop at the corner of the Piazza, hard by the steps that lead up to the Duomo, a butcher called Carlo Bruno. Carlo had been a *facchino* himself in his younger days, and either by superior strength and cunning or by a relentless brutality he had acquired enough to open a business on his own account, in which he put his ferocity to good account by slaughtering cattle.

"He was a gigantic red-faced man, with a mighty moustache of which he was as proud as a Greek brigand.

"In addition to being a bully, he was what is called a good man of business, or, in other words, an unscrupulous and avaricious rascal. Other *facchini* who managed to escape from their fatiguing profession always cut themselves off completely from the past. Not so Carlo. He took advantage of his early association to lend money, and within

a very short time he had all the *facchini* of the island in his clutches.

"I think it was not so much the money he screwed out of them as the opportunity it gave him to bully his clients that afforded the man pleasure. I have seen him come thundering out of his shop, when the *facchini* were drenched with the sweat of their killing ascent from the Marina, and heard him curse them for idle loafers and drive them down again for more burdens, so that they might earn the money to pay him what they owed.

"I have seen him strike the women and kick the men, and because they were *facchini* the rest of the Piazza used to look on without interfering. After all, it was only an affair among the *facchini*, which no civilised person could be expected to understand, still less to adjudicate upon. The *facchini*, as I have said, were a class apart. They did not seem even to keep the ordinary holidays, but had a wintry *festa* of their own on Saint Sebastian's day, when they all got drunk and afterward lighted a large bonfire in the Piazza, round which they would howl and dance when the rest of the Sirene were in bed.

"So, day by day, week by week, Carlo bullied his victims more fiercely, until one evening the *facchini* held a meeting in their own gloomy little *osteria* and decided that the only way to liberate themselves from the butcher was to kill him. It never struck them to call in the help of the law; they recognised that they were in Carlo's power financially, and that unless they could get rid of him altogether it was useless to try to escape his blows.

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"To be sure, Antonuccio might go to the *pretore* and start a *querela* against Carlo for breaking his nose last Saturday; but whatever fine were imposed would be wrung out of Antonuccio himself, and next time Carlo might break more than his nose.

"No; to the simple minds of the *facchini* the only solution of their torment was the death of their aggressor. And how was he to be killed? At a given signal half a dozen of the strongest might rush upon Carlo and overwhelm him, stamp on his face, kick him to death, and be rid of him for ever.

"But this meant that half a dozen hard-working *facchini* would suffer as great evils at the hands of the law as they had suffered at the hands of their persecutor. The fairest way for the greatest number would be to draw lots and let the one chosen by fortune use his knife. They would do their best to protect their liberator against the law; they would subscribe the money to get him away to Argentina. If they did not succeed — *allora*, it was one *facchino* for many, and certainly one man would always have a better chance of escaping than six.

"So lots were drawn, and the choice fell on Raffaello Ferraro, a young man of twenty-three, who was to be married after *pasqua*; and *quare-sima* was half-way done. Everybody agreed how unfortunate it was that the lot should have fallen on poor Raffaello, but . . . I was not at the meeting myself, of course, but I can imagine the shrug with which everybody would express his

sense of fate's decree. It never entered Raffaello's head to contest the result ; the best he could hope for was to catch Carlo unaware, and when he had stabbed him to the heart to escape with his bride to the Argentine ; as for the other *facchini*, they agreed to put up with Carlo's bullying until Raffaello was married and not to press him too hard, so that he could wait his opportunity.

" Carlo, who, you will remember, had been a *facchino* himself, may have divined that the breaking-point had been reached, or there may have been a traitor at that secret assembly, somebody who sold his fellows for the money he owed the butcher. Certainly, it was noticeable that he never gave Raffaello that opportunity to catch him unaware ; and when the young man had been married a fortnight the other *facchini* began to grumble and to ask how much longer Raffaello intended to keep them waiting for their freedom.

" They had reason to complain, they felt ; for if Carlo was more cautious about his movements after dusk, his conduct in the Piazza was more brutal than it had ever been. There was not a *facchino* who escaped the marks of his fist that month, and in view of what they had to put up with it was natural to wish the sentence carried out immediately.

" It never entered Raffaello's head to disown his obligation ; when his fellows urged him to be quick, he merely begged them to be patient for a little while and give him a favourable opportunity. Nor did Assunta, his wife, herself a *facchina*, suggest to him that he should break his oath.



## THE BUREAUCRAT'S TALE

" Italy has always been the most fruitful soil for secret societies, and what had been determined by the *facchini* of Sirene was only a replica of what was being determined by the Camorra or the Mafia or the Mano Nera every day. Raffaello was tall, young, and handsome; he had not been a *facchino* long enough for that monstrous growth of muscle to disfigure him, nor for excess of wine to bloat his countenance. His wife Assunta was his match in comeliness. She was barely eighteen, and might not coarsen under the exacting life for another year or so.

" Raffaello had a brother, a hunchback called Domenico, or rather christened Domenico, for he was always called 'O *gobbetto*. Many deformed children are borne by the wives of *facchini*, who work day in and day out with their husbands. When Raffaello married, he took his younger brother to live with him as he had lived with him since their father and mother died. Raffaello had always been kind to the hunchback, and out of pity for his deformity he had never allowed him to carry heavy loads, but had encouraged him to accept small jobs from benevolent *forestieri*. Lying awake one night, Domenico overheard his brother bemoaning to his newly-married wife a misfortune that now seemed doubly hard, because there was no longer any doubt that Assunta was with child.

" In the morning Domenico took Raffaello aside and asked him if it were really true that he must kill Carlo Bruno, 'o *macellaio*. It was typical of that close corporation of *facchini*, that not even the younger Ferraro had been told a word about

the drawing of lots, and I cannot believe that there really was a traitor at the gathering ; yet Carlo undoubtedly sniffed danger in the air, for he kept himself more unapproachable than ever.

“ I happen to be able to tell you this story more or less from the inside, because Domenico used to work in a small way in my garden, and I was so far involved in the crime as to have an old knife of mine that hung in my hall used as the weapon to dispatch the butcher. Well, after Domenico, poor boy, knew what lay before his brother, he went out much perturbed in spirit to work. Passing a shop window on the way, he caught sight of his reflection in the glass.

“ It seemed to him terrible that one so young and strong and handsome as his brother should be sacrificed, when there was he, deformed, despised by women, useless, to take his place.

“ This happened to be the hunchback’s day for tidying my small garden. When he went to collect his tools, he saw that knife of mine hanging in the hall beside the old-fashioned Venetian mirror, which with its pink and blue cherubs still hangs in my hall : you have often admired its rococo beauty. For the second time that morning poor Domenico looked at himself in a glass, and this time far more clearly than in the shop window he regarded his deformity.

“ And he also observed the rococo cherubs. There came to his mind the memory of what he had heard the night before about Assunta’s condition ; he remembered how, at the wedding, all the guests had laughed and clapped their hands and

## THE BUREAUCRAT'S TALE 🐾

loudly wished Raffaello and Assunta *cento figli maschi*. *Povero Raffaello!* perhaps he would never know the joys of one son. His gaze went beyond the pink and blue cherubs to the knife, and in a moment he made up his mind to show his brother that he was grateful.

"Domenico slipped the knife under his coat and hurried down to the Piazza. The morning boat had just arrived, bringing the usual crowd of tourists on a fine May morning. The tyrant Carlo Bruno was there, gross, red-faced, tremendous. He cursed his slaves and twirled his big moustache. He clouted the women, kicked the men, and even from one woman he snatched her child because she was fumbling with a trunk. He was more ferocious than ever. The tormented *facchini* would not allow Raffaello much longer grace; already they were looking at him in menacing reproach as though he were the author of their ills. The German tourists were grunting out their 'wunder-schöns'; the American tourists were miaowing their 'cutes'; the English tourists were chirping their 'pretties' . . . suddenly the butcher gave a roar of fury and pain and fell forward on his face in a puddle of blood. 'O *gobbetto* had ripped up his stomach with my knife, which, by the way, I never got back from the police.'"

"Is that the irony of your tale?" I asked. I was not meaning to be flippant; but I resented the sacrifice of Domenico to a situation that in England would have been so effectively dealt with much earlier by the police.

"No," said Wickham. "The irony of my tale is that Raffaello Ferraro was killed a week later by the fall of a large packing-case from the inadequate Sirene crane, that his brother Domenico is still alive, buried alive in the dark dungeons of Ponza, and that Assunta's child is that dreadful creature who crawls on all fours along the Strada Nuova whining for alms."

Well did I know that appalling cripple, a boy of sixteen with the face of an aged man.

"And Domenico is still alive?" I murmured. Wickham nodded.

A light *maestrale* had sprung up since my friend began his tale. The Mediterranean was once more joyous and crystalline; the little waves danced like white flowers in the cool breeze. The women with their baskets of grapes were chanting old songs of the vintage. It was good to be sitting beneath an olive tree in Italy again.

"And Domenico is still alive in that hell!"

I pointed to the far horizon, where fifty miles away it was blurred by the dark outline of the Ponza Islands.

"We shall have rain soon," Wickham prophesied. "One does not see those islands from Sirene in fair weather."

Some little while before the Bureaucrat had finished his story, the tramp had become aware of pins and needles in one foot and of the presence of a thistle among the grass upon which he sat. When, therefore, the tale to which uninvited he had listened came to an end, he rose, a little stiffly

—for he was cramped with long lying in the one position—rose, stretched, and turned mechanically to regard the clearing in which an hour had so pleasantly been dozed away, whose ghostly voices had so singularly diverted his siesta. With a start that arrested his arms half-way between the horizontal of stretching and the perpendicular of normal activity, he observed smoke arising from the centre of the tangled mound.

“ Good Lord,” he thought, “ the grass is afire ! ”

But the thin thread of smoke wandering gently, intermittently upward did not gain in volume. Also it was clear, almost transparent in texture ; not at all the smoke of burning hay. With two steps the tramp gained the summit of the mound.

To his amazement he found himself standing over a heavy iron grille, between the bars of which a pale wisp of smoke filtered idly upward. Instinctively he steadied himself against noise in movement. Cautiously he dropped on one knee and parted with careful hands the leaves and matted stalks that overgrew the grating. Thus revealed, it appeared an amazingly strong affair, its bars clamped together, their ends embedded in solid concrete. Weathered though they were, the metal and its surrounding setting seemed as firm as though they were the work of yesterday. “ Regular prison bars,” thought the tramp, and bent his head towards the black depths beneath the forbidding grille. The strong sunlight, falling athwart the iron bars, lit clearly about two feet of rocky wall, but threw into inky shadow the rest of the mysterious dungeon. As the tramp craned

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over the more equally to pit his eyesight against the darkness, one of the voices heard earlier and as though in dream—that of the Professor—rose from the obscurity.

“Prolonged seclusion in this peculiar residence grows tedious,” it said. “Are you persuaded there is no exit through the grating in the roof?”

Involuntarily the tramp replied.

“I’m afraid not, sir,” he said. “It’s as firm as a rock.”

A whistle sounded from above.

“Hullo!” cried the voice of the Bureaucrat. “Who’s that? Who are you? Where are we? Can you get us out of this damned hole?”

“One at a time, please!” cried the tramp. “It’s I. That is one. I am a wandering mendicant. That is two. You are in France. That is three. It doesn’t seem likely. That is four. Dummy’s lead.”

“For God’s sake don’t be funny!” snarled the unseen but angry official. “Shove a stick down the grating and let me scramble up a moment.”

The tramp did as requested. In a few moments the dusty head and pale, bad-tempered face of a young man in an expensive but torn tweed coat emerged from blackness into sunshine. Their owner blinkingly regarded his possible rescuer through the bars of his prison.

“What did you say you were?” he demanded.

“I am a tramp.”

“You look like one all right, but then so do I. And I’m not and you’re not. Start again. Who are you?”

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"A tramp," replied the ragged visitor patiently. "I am not pulling your leg. But you *are* pulling my arm—nearly out of its socket. If I leave go of the stick, what will you fall on?"

"On the Professor," returned the Bureaucrat, grinning. "He'd hate it. Hold on a moment longer while I find a hold."

After some scrabbling, the imprisoned youth succeeded in wedging himself across the funnel of rock and concrete that connected the grille with the underground cavern, in which, it appeared, he and his learned companion had for two days been imprisoned. How they found their way to so lugubrious a lodgment he did not explain, his mind dwelling rather on escape than on the events of the recent past.

"Are you hungry?" asked the tramp.

"No," snapped the Bureaucrat. "We've plenty to eat. But we're tired of playing rabbits and want to go home. Do you take me?"

The young man's impatience and discourteous sarcasm called for the tramp's sense of mischievous humour. He played for time.

"Is there no passage to your cave? You can't have got in through this grating; it hasn't been touched for years."

"Heaven help the man! Should we ask to be *got* out if we could *walk* out? There was a passage, but it's fallen in. Two moles had a sneezing match and the soil took flight for yards round. So we were pinched. Is *that* clear?"

"Perfectly," replied the tramp with ceremony. "Perfectly. How you are to get out is less so. ]

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shall have to go for help, and it is five miles to St. Hilaire, the nearest town. You must resign yourselves to a while longer in captivity. Besides, how do I know you are not better where you are? I must consider the common weal."

And he bowed his head in mockery of thought.

The Bureaucrat snorted, made a rash gesture of impatience, lost his footing and vanished into the gloom. A thump, a scuffle, and two imprecations—one in obscure, the other in plain English—told a sad tale of professorial ills and bruised officialdom.

"There is a further point," went on the tramp, as if no interruption had taken place and with a deliberation calculated to provoke his listeners to the limits of endurance, "which affects my personal feeling in this matter. One of you is admittedly an educationalist. The other may be as bad. A Professor and an official of the Board! And *I* of all men am asked to deliver them! Truly there are no limits to human impertinence."

"Verbose unknown!" came the voice of the Professor, oratorical, a little august, from the blackness of his prison, "your unjust dislike of my philological activity arouses my curiosity. I should be interested to hear what grudge you have against learning—useless learning, mind you. Explain your grievance and, your heart thus lightened of its burden, make all speed to extricate us from this prison."

The tramp smiled at the unexpected overture.

"More tale-telling? Surely there have been stories enough for one afternoon?"



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"Yes—and more than enough!" growled the Bureaucrat. His voice was faint and distant. Perhaps he nursed his bruises in a remote corner of the cave.

"Dear, dear!" said the Professor. "As if human frailty could ever be too exhaustively disclosed! Ignore the protests of my young friend," he continued, "and recount your story. A tramp in fact is not always a tramp in fancy, and I suppose that beneath your pose of errant beggary something lurks—probably enough disreputable but perhaps diverting."

"I never yet told a story down a mineshaft," said the tramp. "Probably vocal subtlety will be lost. I must consider a moment the right inflection and technique. I warn you also that the tale is that of my dog, rather than of myself. You cannot see Baba, but he is here—very much here."

For a few moments complete silence reigned. Then

# THE TRAMP'S TALE

## THE FAITHFUL FRIEND

By DESMOND COKE

I KNOW (he began suddenly in a slow, restful monotone) it is the fashion now to blame everything upon the virtues, if only because our great-aunts were so brutal to the vices. Either point of view may be correct, or neither; or Truth—as Aristotle saw—may lie midway between them; but it is, anyhow, minutely true that I have been ruined, driven into what you see, by a certain grim relentless trait of passive Fidelity.

It will possibly surprise you (he went on, with no change whatever in his lugubrious tone) to hear me talking of "Aristotle" without prefixing the now customary aspirate. These very words, "minutely," "passive," "customary," "prefix," may even seem to come strangely from the top of a ragged suit that has neither tie nor collar. At any rate I hope so. That was why I used them. . . . But I see now that it was youthful and absurd of me to worry so much about the world's opinion of myself, and I will try to talk more simply, for it is a simple story, and even if I should impress you at the start by seeming a most learned fellow, I should still earn laughter towards the end for letting it be what it is. Yes, what says the philo-

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sopher? "Life is a Comedy to those who think, a Tragedy to those who feel": and, however low I may have been sunk, myself, by the abominable loyalty of such a friend as no man ever had and by my own conventional failure to repel it, I am sure that you, at any rate, have kept yourselves aloofly intellectual; among the Gods that laugh.

If so, you will at least realise that all this dignified opening is just a trick—very human, extremely obvious—to let you understand that in origin I am even as yourselves: "the son of poor but respectable parents," "the product of a Public School," "the loyal alumnus of my Alma Mater"—in fact, everything radiant and full of promise that has ever been made stuffy and commonplace by the perverse magic of a Fleet Street tag.

But there I am, off on my windy phrases once again! Excuse me. I am not like that as a rule. I think I am nervously dreading the revelation on which I have started: so tragically vital to myself, so pitifully abject to such of you as listen till the end: but no matter, I will get at it without more bitterness or hiding behind words.

I was, I say, well born; educated like my fellows; and thought something of a scholar, as well as not a little of a sportsman. Life spread itself ahead of me—but no, I promised to get on! Enough to say I had an almost brilliant youth.

You may justly object at this point that after what I have said, you can well understand how I have (it seems) ended as a tramp, but that you cannot at all comprehend why I ever started as an usher. . . . Oh, yes, I was a schoolmaster. I

thought I had told you that ! As to the reasons : —well, why does a man, fresh from the University, decide on any one career ? You must admit the imps of Comedy, if only on the basis of that random choice. I chose to become schoolmaster for half a dozen reasons very good to twenty-three, if now rather feeble—I confess—to the severer logic of my forties. I should still get games ; the holidays were long ; I had no strong wish for any other life ; above all, to be brief about this, it seemed easy . . . I succumbed. What did the fifties and the sixties matter to me, scarcely then out of my “teens” ? I could do something different later : and so, you see, it has turned out !

But I was doing well, succeeding. Keeness took the place of that conviction, that belief in education, which I should have had, and I easily hid my hereditary idleness under the physical energy of Youth. The boys learnt little from me, I am much afraid : but I am sure that they learnt no more from any of the other masters, and they liked many of them less. I was excellent at nets, and in general always ready to oblige by helping at anything which held my interest. I sometimes recited on Saturday nights, but not often, and I never buttonholed the boys or asked them out for strolls. I was a strict disciplinarian when anything came beneath my notice, but I avoided the odium of detective work. The testimonials that I received on leaving increased in warmth with my age. Altogether, on my fortieth birthday, a very solemn landmark in any career, I saw no

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good cause to regret that young Undergraduate's careless and momentous choice. A year later I was offered the position of housemaster in a school where I had been two years.

Now comes the peripety—I beg your pardon, the change of fortune, the gloomy side of the gingerbread, whatever you may choose to call it. Why haggle about names? It is here.

(He stooped wearily and touched a shapeless hairy mass of black that straggled at his feet. It quivered, stretched, formed itself into some random sort of shape, and finally stood revealed as a fantastically monstrous cur which feverishly licked its master's hand, as if in joy at a new finding of him, and gazed up with a sentimental wisdom through the surprising beauty of soft yellow eyes that lit and redeemed its coal-black shaggy ugliness.)

This hybrid inspiration (went on the tramp, seemingly moved to a new flow of fine language but still on one low mournful note;) what the romantic dealer wittily described as of the spaniel "variety"; this truly varied nondescript, that in itself suffices to prove the Creator's artistic supremacy and humour; this creature, I say, whom for obvious reasons I call Baa-baa; the most faithful and most foolish of all created insects, not excluding Woman; this *dog*, for one must find a word, is the fount and origin of all my troubles. *Fons et origo*, Baba: that's just what you are, and not a very clean one either.

Of course (he went on, abruptly changing to a manner of more homely confidence, as if now on

easier ground), he didn't always look like this. He was quite different as a baby. For one thing, he was smaller. I quite believed he would become a spaniel in time. Anyhow, he looked up at me with those wise yellow eyes, and shivered in the man's threadbare coat—very much like mine now—and stretched a paw to claim me, and I fell. It was the holidays before the term that was to see me a housemaster. I told myself that there would be somewhere in the house for him and that the boys would like him.

I was right in both, but not as I expected. In the six weeks that remained of the long summer holidays he grew with alarming rapidity, and when term came I was to learn that there was truly somewhere in the house for him—the spot where I was at the moment—and that the boys liked him, as the luxury at last of a real joke against their master. As I went around the playing-fields or study passages with my black doom behind me, I could easily hear that my nickname had changed. Last term's had been almost flattering and at least from a severely classic source; this term's had its origin in a crude inaccurate mingling of two baby-rhymes. My woolly pet was given the name I have already mentioned to you, Baa-baa, or more briefly Baba, nor was I long in learning that his fidelity to me had gained me the ignominious name of Mary. . . .

I realise how little all this is to you, but it is more to a schoolmaster, much more to a new housemaster anxious to impress his boys. I felt that, where I should be assuming a slightly more

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pompous attitude as suiting my position, I had in effect for the first time become a figure almost farcical in my absurdity: Mary with her little lamb.

You may say—many *did* say—why not tie the mongrel up? During the holidays I did at first: but he was so soft and hairy that no collar seemed to hold him long, unless I tied it really tight, when all the neighbouring wives wrote to protest about the noise and my brutality towards the dumb creation. Besides, Baba didn't like it. . . . If he failed to get free, I found him dejected and terrified, with panting flanks, on my return. The poor simple fool always thought I had deserted him. He jibbered at me as at one back from the dead and made the neighbours mad. So I gave in, and he was happy following me round. I missed him too, I must admit, when I went out alone. One does appreciate Fidelity, at forty. . . .

When, however, the second day of term saw the school work beginning, it was different. As suited my new dignity of housemaster, I had been promoted, after two years of the Upper Third, to the now vacant Remove; and in taking a form, it is only the first day that counts. Poor Baba, as I too grew to call him, therefore had to be tied up; and, with a little secret nervousness but much outer magnificence, I stode down the central path to introduce myself to my new bigger boys. But I felt somehow incomplete and wished that Baba had been with me.

Before I stepped into the Main Hall, he *was*!—leaping at me, squirming, squeaking, smiling: all

the old symptoms of mixed relief, penitence, and exultation.

I own that I was angry. Heads could be seen already, peering over the opaque-glazed lower panes of my new room form. To take the idiot back to my house and be five minutes late would be a fatal start. To give him to a boy, who would let him escape for fun if Baba failed to wriggle free in earnest—this would be still worse. *Quem Deus vult perdere, prius dementat* : I decided he must come with me for once. Perhaps he would lie down and sleep.

The boys, less irresponsible than my young scallawags of other terms, were back at their desks and stood up formally as I came in : but behind their grave faces I could read dangerously strangled laughter, and I knew, of course, that it was war to the knife between us, for any form will rag its master if the fates follow, and I felt that—to mix my figures further—the dice was loaded in the boys' favour by this black beast behind me.

"Lie down," I said sternly, with a real air of believing in my order.

I think he somehow understood the peril, or possibly he was hurt by my tone, for he actually subsided in a dark limp mass below my feet. I suspected that two yellow eyes, projected from a snout along two paws, were steadily regarding my new pupils, and I cannot pretend that this anxiety made me give of my best as teacher. All went strangely well, however, till I began asking questions. Then Baba, who is a creature of strong moods, did not *like* boys putting up their



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hands. He barked as each was raised—and seldom have I seen so many boys alert to answer. His barks became continual and plaintive. I could almost hear the masters above and below me emulating their wives by sending messages of anger. I gave Baba a shrewd kick. He howled, a musical diminuendo howl. Most of the boys laughed. A few, older and more subtle, muttered half-heard protests or made tut-tut sounds. I felt, for the first time in my career as master, the shameful helpless fear of the man who knows he is losing control. I moistened my tongue and forced my lips to sternness.

“Don’t put up your hands,” I said; “it’s a cheap board-school habit. I shall ask questions where I like, not where you do.” I tortured myself to facetiousness. “I want to catch you out, you know!”

Nobody laughed, and I felt I was doomed: but Baba, to my relief, also welcomed my remarks in silence. Perhaps he was offended at my kick, or the room’s heat may have made him sleepy. Whatever the cause, a blessed quiet fell upon him, and the form responded to his lead. Five minutes, seeming like hours in the tension of dread and vigilance: then—never so welcome to any boy, however ill prepared his construe—that deep boom of the clock which told me the period was over.

“What have you got now?” I asked blandly, knowing well the answer, but dreading that nobody might care to give it.

“Science, sir,” replied, to my relief, some boy

whom I yet instinctively despised as he gave me fresh dignity.

"You can go quietly," I said. Baba started up in fury at their general movement, and barks mingled with loud mocking laughter in the passage formed the last moments of my first hour with the Remove.

You may consider that I drew the wrong moral from my pet's tenacity of faithfulness, but, going over it all again and again now as I tramp from town to town, I still think I acted for the best. I reflected that he would inevitably escape again, if I should tie him up; that if he did not, he would infuriate the master's wives and babies; that, now he had once been in school, the worst probably was over. I brought him down to the third hour. It gave me, anyhow, a sense of triumph over the Remove and Fate, to bring the dog in thus of my set purpose; and besides, I did awfully, you know, like him to be there. . . .

He was delighted, and soon settled down to sleep. The boys, always inconsequent and out for novelty, forgot him so soon as they found he was useless in their unceasing effort to smash my discipline. Sometimes, it is true, he helped them. Sleepy but vigilant, the true watch-dog, he was up in a moment at a sudden noise: and on this fact they played with diabolic subtlety until they learnt that any movement loud or abrupt enough to draw his bark was also sufficiently an outrage to excuse my punishment. The cards always favour a master, even if he were not intended to be thought a beast; and so within ten days I was able to assure

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myself that, though my dog undoubtedly had gained a victory over me by his importunacy, I had at any rate mastered the Remove and taught even him how to behave in Form. The master's wives ceased writing; the babies slept; I got laughter for my pedagogic wit; Xenophon marched a creditable number of parasangs, each lesson; Baba seldom snored or barked at bunnies in his sleep; and everything seemed to have settled down for the best in the best of possible worlds.

What a cynical, delusive hag is Fate! And how cleverly does she produce, to wreck a fool, an even bigger ass!

I often wonder: if I had been allowed to prosper and rise, should I have become as fatuous and tape-tied as the average of head masters? Should I have had no interest in any course except the tried and stale? Such, at any rate, was the mind of the self-satisfied idiot who approached me on the football field before the end of this same day and asked me whether I was busy. I hastened to be futile and to throw in the loved title of respect.

"Now or as a rule, sir?"

"Now, Dash," and he added my name (which matters to none of you), in a tone of mixed seriousness and benevolence which instantly told me that he had evolved a little scene or lecture for my welfare.

Of course I was not busy, I assured him. Then he would like a little chat with me. He led the way imposingly towards his house, as if to show that it was a matter altogether beyond playing-

fields. Obedient and absurdly nervous, I fell in behind him. The dog followed on.

Presently, as if to prove the absence of ill feeling, the head master turned towards me and made a comment on the fine state of the weather. With this honesty forced me to concur. We walked on again in silence.

"Come in, Dash," he said, with the same threatening geniality when we were at his study door. Then, as I entered, he added, more angrily: "Leave the *dog* outside," at which, with a savage push at Baba's broad but flabby chest, he thrust him backwards; hurried into the room; and rapidly reassuming dignity, motioned me to a straight-backed chair as it had been a guillotine.

"It is about that animal that I want to speak," he started. "It has never been my idea, or indeed my practice"—a phrase that seemed to give him pleasure, for he chewed it firmly—"to dictate to my masters on the social side. There are, I mean, schools where it is demanded that housemasters must be married men, and so forth: but I have always left these matters to the discretion of my staff, nor, I may say, have I been disappointed. I think you will acquit me of any interference in your personal concerns!"

He almost melted to a smile, and I hastily reassured him with a gestured platitude: totally immersed in hideous anxiety as to my dog. Would his fidelity, that I had often cursed before, now serve me by keeping him outside the door, or might he not, at this very moment, be making hay in the head master's ante-room; raiding his

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meagre larder ; alarming his eleemosynary spouse ; terrifying her pasty infants into a lifelong and hereditary imbecility ? Vistas, illimitable vistas. . . . The words came to me through a distant haze of ever-shifting apprehension.

"When, however, it comes to dogs in form, I consider that I have the right to speak. Even there, mind you," he added rapidly, as if afraid that narrowness might be laid to his charge : "were the dog of decent breeding and properly behaved, I might be willing to consider the case upon its special merits : but you must see, my dear Dash, that *your* dog !" and he spread his arms. "I put it to you, frankly : what can be the only effect upon your pupils ? How can boys of that age and position in the school be expected to obey or respect a master who cannot even gain firm discipline over his own dog ? "

He paused for a reply, but I had none to give. A silence made the room seem overfull. From the doormat outside there came a shrill whine of protest that was sheer relief to me. Baba was still there !

The head master glared towards the door and frowned. "A man," he said, more loudly, as in protest, "who cannot govern his dog will never govern anyone." On which he chewed again.

Baba suddenly struck up his notorious howl. Perhaps he was lonely. He may have wanted to know what was going on. He began scratching vehemently at the painted door. Possibly he was nervous of my safety. I think he never quite liked the head master.

"There!" came the triumphant voice. "What is the brute doing now?"

"He wants to come in," I answered; utterly beyond anything like thought or tact or throwing-in of sirs.

"To come in *here*!" Horror at sacrilege was never so expressed. "Go out and teach it to lie still. No, leave it to me; I'll show you how to train a puppy. Scratching all my paint off. Get away, you brute, you!" Inimitably middle-aged, he lunged a heavy kick at the astonished Baba, who, having but one idea in his skull at a time, dashed for the opening, and in a second was blissfully giving me the welcome earned from a human only after absent years. The head master steamed slowly behind.

"*Don't* encourage the brute, Dash," came the rebukeful voice. "Ah, you thief, you: you would, would you? Tearing the whole house to pieces!" It was only at these words that my galvanised eyes took in the full horror of the scene. Baba had *not* been waiting patiently upon the mat. . . . He had roamed. . . . Whither, I cannot precisely say, for I am not a family man; but either from the nursery or from the wife's recesses he had captured some mystery of clothing, a pink contraption that now sagged from his genial mouth and seemed to raise the lowest human in the soul of the head master. Threatening but inarticulate, he flung his weight at Baba.

That inspired idiot took the whole thing—I blankly foresaw it—as a delicious game. To have a trailing object in one's mouth and to draw it

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narrowly from a pursuer's grasp ; there is the dog's Elysium. Again and again he dashed around the room ; settled in a distant corner ; laid the pink frippery upon the floor ; yawned and turned from it as if by now altogether bored—but ah, how well I knew that one watchful eye !—then as the head master thundered down in triumph, Baba suddenly bounced back a foot and off he dashed, trailing his loot again from a laughing mouth ; squirming himself beneath the low-built sofa, till the tantalised and furious foe retreated snorting ; when he was off once more running like one mad, with tail tucked in, round and round the room ; then settling, a delusive butterfly ; and so the whole Comedy began again. . . . The head master, lifelong devotee of discipline and perseverance, refused to be balked so easily as I had been, I own, a dozen times by these guerrilla tactics. Foiled as to speed, he reverted suddenly to type, and by a delightfully naïve instinct, confronted with such insubordination, strode to a corner by the bookcase and took out—*a cane* !

I see now that I did the wrong thing.

I laughed. . . .

At that the head master seemed (I realise the sacrilege of such a phrase) suddenly to see red. He slashed about him wildly, as if swatting flies. Baba was in a delirium of bliss. Never such a game as this ! I loved the sloppy creature more in that moment, I think, than ever before : so fatuous, so human. He advanced, retreated, barked, ran, tried a thousand ways of getting pleasure from this kindly playmate. Then, abrupt

as ever, the disaster. A lucky hit got home: a hit with the trained arm's full force. Baba, only a baby after all, dropped his toy with a pathetic yelp, and rushed beneath the sofa—amid a storm of blows. There he turned himself and faced the foe with a cavernous rumbling growl, that I had never heard before. It was so charming that I quite forgot to be angry with the head master. Memories of Fiction tell me now that I ought to have been heroic. I should, at least, have smashed the cane across my knee. But I did nothing, uttered not a word. I am afraid I merely chuckled.

The head master flung his weapon, with dramatic self-satisfaction, on the sofa and turned, crimson from victory, to tackle me. I pay this much tribute to his personality, that I confess I trembled.

At that moment—as he retreated—the inimitable Baba, always a great one at a joke, dashed from his cover, hurled himself on the foe, and bit him on the firm back of his calf.

He bit him, yes: but not hard, honestly not hard. . . . He was only a pup, and there isn't any vice about him. I think, myself, it was only his fun. . . . I told the head master so: but he would not believe me. . . . Possibly I could not get my face quite serious enough.

"Either that dog or you leaves this place to-day," he thundered, ominously red.

"Or both," I replied, honestly believing, in the moment's heat, that I had been a little brilliant.

It was only when we got out into the Central Path, crowded with boys going to call-over, that



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I realised my hound, who must have bulldog in him somewhere, had picked the pink thing up again and still held it sagging from a corner of his triumphant mouth. I did not like to take it from him. He was walking so jauntily, and that hit must have hurt. Besides, it was just as well that he should have scored something, as I lost my job.

I don't know at all how the head master explained to his parents and Governing Body the leaving of a housemaster in the first fortnight of his office ; but he did not ask me to stay, and I felt sure, if I made peace with him, that he would poison Baba. So I decided to go and tempt my luck in some other school.

But that somehow never happened. No school wants a master in the second week of term—or, indeed, in any week at all if his last testimonial dates to two years back ; and the head master pompously refused to answer all my applications. My family would give me no help beyond some really invaluable advice. They thought I had been very weak to sacrifice my chances for the sake of a dog in even buying which I had been swindled, but it was never too late to be sensible : and so on. . . . One of them cheered me for two days by an obviously laboured period, which I wish I could recall in full. It pointed out, I remember, in the lapidary style, that I must choose between “ my prospects and my puppy, my cur and my career.”

Otherwise, however, nothing : so when my few pounds went, I “ swelled the ranks of the great unemployed,” or, in more simple English, sank.

It's curious how quickly a good suit turns to rags if you've nowhere to change it, and the weight of my razor soon seemed to exceed the pleasure that its use could give me. Oh, it's surprising how easy one finds it to sink. . . .

And after all, I wonder if I'm less happy than when I was struggling to rise? Who has ever defined happiness? We get back to where we started—Aristotle! I've no responsibilities; I am free; I never beg; I work for my night's lodging; I sleep well; I feel fit; I have the very best of company. Is there any moral or social duty to succeed? Possibly; but to me it is just a problem to pass away a treeless mile or some brief wayside rest while Baba sleeps.

Oh yes, of course I see that you despise me. . . . You side with the family, with the head master. . . . I should have been firmer with the dog. . . . My whole tragedy strikes you as unnecessary, foolish. . . . I knew it would be so. That, remember, is exactly why I was a little nervous and literary at the start.

Well, it is—as my dear aunt told me—never too late to be sensible. I may still get another job, though it is not easy when once one is down, and I feel that just the same thing would occur again. I don't think that Baba *likes* school life. . . .

Or I might take their advice and lose him. But how *could* I ever lose him? He never leaves my side or heels. He seems to anticipate my movement. I sometimes think that he dictates it. How can anyone fight such fidelity? Or, even, is one intended to?

## THE NEW DECAMERON

And besides—what should I do, now, without him? . . .

Towards the end of his story the tramp had seemed to be less talking than thinking to himself, and as his voice now gradually trailed into a silence, he sat perfectly still, staring out moodily before him, the slave of forces proved too strong.

The patience of one of his hearers snapped in two.

"If your damned story is really done, why not get a move on and fetch help? I suppose you're satisfied *now*, Professor?"

Still the tramp made no sound or movement. The Bureaucrat shouted furiously: "Hi! Are you asleep?" But there was no reply. It was the Professor to whom came the idea of genius.

"Baba!" he called. "Baba! good dog! Baba!" and he whistled urgently.

Hearing his name thus mysteriously called, the black mongrel roused itself from sleep and showed every symptom of excitement. Leaping up at his master, he thrust a hintful snout hard into his leg. The tramp started from his reverie, patted the creature's head, and rose with tired obedience, taking up his hedgerow stick. Baba, as they moved off, turned his wonderful yellow eyes wisely and calmly toward the mound and its hidden prisoners; stretched himself luxuriously; kicked scornful dust back from his strong hind legs; and so ambled happily off, close as Fate behind his threadbare master's heels.

END OF PART I

PART II

THE OLD GENTLEMAN

## PART II.—THE OLD GENTLEMAN

### I

THE town of St. Hilaire possesses, thanks to history, to a tradition of aristocracy, and above all to a gambling concession, an importance and a social finish greater than its size alone would warrant. Its hotels are far above the average for a provincial town ; its casino ; its race-course ; its mediæval town hall ; its cathedral and its library-museum, attract thousands of visitors, whose leisure may also be passed in café, opera-house, or music-hall as comfortably and wellnigh as professionally as in Paris itself.

On to the Grande Place face the principal cafés of the town, and among them the Café de la Régence is the acknowledged chief. There—for apéritif, lunch, and liqueur—congregate at midday the notabilities of St. Hilaire ; there, until late at night, members of the leading families and the more sprightly of the smart visitors (of whom in spring and summer is no lack) seek music, dancing, laughter, and the more subtle if hazardous pleasures to which, the world over, these diversions so often lead.

At a table on the terrace of the Café de la Régence, shaded by an awning from that same hot sun that a few miles away was driving a solitary tramp to

## THE OLD GENTLEMAN

the shelter of a green and tempting coppice, sat alone a large gentleman of advanced age. He seemed deliberately to bear the stamp of a vanished period, from the grave set of his tall-crowned hat to the vivid discretion of his elastic-sided boots. He wore a loose-fitting suit of buff alpaca and a wide Gladstone collar, above which glowed a round red face, while over it flowed white Dundreary whiskers. His expression—usually benign with the benignity of retired affluence—was at the present moment serious, as befitted a man engaged on important correspondence. A quarto block of finest quality writing paper lay open in front of him; an empty coffee cup and a half-empty glass of cognac stood at his elbow; in his hand was a gold fountain pen. There came an instant when, with something of a flourish, the old gentleman set at the foot of a page covered with fine handwriting a characteristic signature. Then, turning back a number of sheets already closely written, he settled himself in his chair and prepared to give a final reading to his composition.

DEAR GRANDSON JOSEPH (he read),

The requirements of your magazine and of its importunate editor have till now sufficiently spoilt my holiday-making by their insistent presence to satisfy the most exigent member of your young and urgent generation. That I sit down at last to meet them as best I may, is due as much to chance as to my own merit, but perhaps most of all to my good intentions. May ungrateful youth so far forget its traditional heedlessness as to thank

an old man for thus saddening his last years with its absurd requests.

I have come to St. Hilaire from Paris, because I felt unwilling to give up comfort and the spectacle of others' gaiety, but was unable longer to tolerate the glare and dust of a big city. After two days here I am well satisfied with my decision, for this is a charming place—bright but shady, restful but never dull, and above all highly illustrative of the follies and vices of an age that differs less in those respects from its predecessors than you, maybe, would care to admit. I am told that the country round is interesting and beautiful, but before I can properly enjoy excursions or sight-seeing, I must fulfil the rash promise made to you, and send such matter as I can collect for the periodical by which all cultural ills are to be cured.

There are two enclosures to this letter. The first—and this, though uninvited, will likely appeal the more strongly to your taste—came into my hands in a curiously romantic way which, if you are fully to appreciate its nature, I must explain to you.

About a fortnight ago I was dining in the Bois—alone, of course, but for the bitter-sweet memories of forty-five years ago. My table stood a little apart, and from where I sat I could see new-comers as they entered and enjoy the febrile absurdity of the fashionable, aimless throng. The restaurant was very crowded ; indeed, I remember wondering whether, save that opposite to myself, a vacant seat remained in the whole glittering place. I had no fear of intrusion ; the head-waiter is a friend of

mine (it is worth his while) ; but my position gave me that faint twinge of uneasiness that comes from a parcel by one's side on the seat of a crowded train.

For long enough no one had come into the restaurant, until there stepped through the door a solitary girl. That she was English I immediately perceived ; equally evident was it that she was not dining alone in a smart café in the Bois for the professional reasons usual in such circumstances. She looked pale and preoccupied ; under her arm she carried a book. A well-dressed young Englishwoman who reads at dinner in a fashionable Paris restaurant was, as George would say, " an intriguing proposition." When I saw my friend Achille gesticulating respectfully to the new-comer, I had a sudden impulse of curiosity. I realised that the mysterious girl was being turned away from a full house ; I observed her sweep the restaurant with her eyes, pause a moment as she noted the vacant space at my own table, and turn to Achille with a questioning word. He swung round to follow her pointing finger, saw me and hesitated. Almost involuntarily I nodded—slightly, but to so trained an eye unmistakably. Begging the girl to excuse him, he threaded a way between the tables to my side. " Ask the lady to do me the honour of sharing my table," I said. In a few moments she was making a slight bow, prior to seating herself in the vacant place not three feet from my nose.

Beyond a murmured welcome as I returned her bow, I said nothing, merely resuming my seat



and my interrupted dinner. She ordered a meal with strange care, threw back her cloak and prepared—in full evening dress, mind you, bare shoulders, ostrich fan and all—to prop her book against the cruet stand and read as she ate! I am afraid that my interest in this proceeding overbore discretion, for I certainly watched her as she placed the volume conveniently and securely before her. But it was lucky that I so far transgressed against taste, for I observed immediately two interesting things. In the first place she wore a wedding ring; in the second, the book she was reading was your lamentable and provocative novel, good grandson Joseph—the novel about which I had such trouble with your parents.

The sight of the familiar blue cover and of the gilt lettering spelling out across the table—*The Pitiful Wife* (as you know, I have always considered the title the best thing in a bad book)—robbed me of my last reserves of courtesy. I was now thoroughly intrigued with my strange vis-à-vis, and determined to learn something of her history. The chance of conversation was not long in coming. When moving the cruet to make room for her fillet of sole, the waiter clumsily knocked the book on to the floor. I picked it up and, handing it to its owner, said: “The author of that story is my grandson. I disapprove of him and of his book, but I should like to send him news of his foreign circulation. Would it be impertinent to ask your opinion of his work?” I suppose that my extreme age and benevolent aspect reassured her (as it reassures so many of the charming young women I

encounter on my travels), for although she did not smile—indeed, her eyes had a perplexed and child-like misery, as though they had forgotten how to smile—she answered quietly and collectedly that she “had hoped the book would help her, but now thought that she could do it better herself.” This extraordinary reply encouraged me to develop the acquaintance. Dinner became a very protracted affair, but by the time I dropped her at her hotel in Paris at 11.30 I knew enough to make me glad that hazard had thrown her in my way. Three days later the history of the lonely novel reader was completed (so far as my—and your—shares in it are concerned) by my receipt of the manuscript, which I now enclose. The theme is strangely similar to that of your unworthy book; the title—as you see—is the same; the treatment—well, to every man his fancy, but you are not the sensible young person I believe you to be if you do not confess that the work of this unknown girl can teach you a good deal more than your novel could ever have taught her. You see, I challenged her to write a version of *fact*, under the title of your *fiction* and in competition with it. She assures me that her story is *what happened to her*—and, when I read it, I believe her word. The very flaunting indifference to all but her own sorrow that enabled her to revisit that restaurant (they went there often, she and her husband, on their honeymoon), to insist on a place being found for her, to read during her meal a book that *might* help her in her trouble, that *must* torture her by the similarity of its narrative to her own experience,

is to my mind proof enough that hers was indeed a case of trouble to the brave.

Read her story ; respect her secret. Ignorance of her name will make easier your escape from questioners. I have little doubt that you will wish to publish the tale in your paper. She will not mind ; for she remains anonymous and—pitifully enough—the poor child hopes that even her own words in print may “ help her ” to face a future of loneliness and pain.

So much for the first of my enclosures. The second, although more nearly what you ask for, is less sensational. That is to say, it has no romantic prelude, and its content is suave rather than terrible, belonging as it does to a period of greater complacency and contentment than these nervous, haste-ridden days. You begged me to find among my brother's papers some unpublished story from the real Victorian age. In London I searched in vain. Then I remembered that there were two cases of papers removed to a bank from the Paris flat in which he passed much of his time toward the end of his life. They had been virtually unexamined since his death, it having been established for purposes of probate that no valuables in the accepted sense were among them, the bulk being correspondence and personal litter. I sifted them carefully and found a certain quantity of manuscript, but only one item at all suitable for your purpose. That is the story I now send to you. It bore no title, and I have labelled it—formally enough—*A Victorian Tale*. You will observe with interest the pencil note at the foot

of the last page : .“ Trollope liked this story and regretted that, when first he read it, he had relinquished control of the *St. Paul's Magazine*, else would he gladly have published it in that periodical.” Anthony Trollope was a close friend of your great-uncle's, and the latter would have been pleased to contribute to his paper. But you profit by the chance that made this impossible—if, that is, you like the tale well enough to offer it to your public as a sample of the short-story writing of the past.

There is no more to say. I am glad, as I am tired of writing. Let me know that this packet arrives and your opinion of its contents. If I have failed to achieve the critical standard of a more advanced generation than my own, I am sorry, but you will believe me that what has been done has been done with all the goodwill of

Your affectionate grandfather,

JAMES WITHERSHAW.

The writer of this long epistle was sufficiently satisfied with it next to select and address a foolscap envelope for its reception. He folded his letter carefully and was about to slip it into its cover, when he recalled the very enclosures with which it was concerned. They were in his breast pocket. He looked them over, folded them round the letter to his grandson, inserted them carefully in the envelope and stuck them down. Here, textually, they are :

# ENCLOSURE I: THE TALE OF THE SOLITARY ENGLISH GIRL

# THE TALE OF THE SOLITARY ENGLISH GIRL

## THE PITIFUL WIFE

By STORM JAMESON

“SO good of you to come all this way to see me.”

Jane smiled. “I came perhaps twenty miles. You crossed the Atlantic to visit me. Or, at least, that is what you wrote. It is more likely that you came to steal our trade and gathered me in as a make-weight.”

The man regarded her with a gently humorous air.

“Don’t chatter, darling,” he said softly.

Jane’s glance faltered. The drawling intimate voice troubled her.

“You chattered two years ago,” he went on.

“I found it a poor enough defence,” she retorted. “Have you no scruples?”

He laughed outright. “Scruples? My dear, I adore you. Moreover, it was by your own wish that I refrained from conducting my love affair with shameless candour.”

The pallor of her small face showed more strangely clear when the flame had burned out in it.

"It was hardly that," she said smoothly.

"Hardly a love affair? Perhaps not. I never had you, but I held you in my arms and kissed you outrageously. I think I had everything of you but the last joys. And those you withheld—for what, my dear? For pity, you said once. And for love of your husband, you said, too. Did you, then, love him when your throat stirred under my mouth and your blood taught your lips a madness they had not known?"

She could smile at him, and she made shift to turn her smile into a low laughter.

"You talk too well, my good David," she said. "Did you bid me here to recall a story two years old?"

She was disturbed and shaken. His indolent grace, which she had forgotten, stirred her afresh, and when he stood up and walked across the room her eyes dwelt on the lithe defiance of his broad body. He was enormous, a swart giant, and adroit in his movements as a wild cat. But she had seen him stand immobile, the grace beaten out of him by the frightful effort that kept him there, rigid, his hands by his sides, his eyes narrow openings through which the violence of his desires had escaped to crush her, melting her bones like wax and pressing on her limbs until they were heavy and powerless as the limbs of a swimmer beaten by the surf. If he had moved, she could have withstood him in nothing. He had neither moved nor touched her, and slowly, dragging out of the surf her swooning body, she had escaped into life.

## TALE OF SOLITARY ENGLISH GIRL

After that, he had gone, and she had forgotten.

She had thought herself free, but she saw now that she had never been free; she had slept, and the sound of his voice, the touch of his hand in greeting, had been enough to wake her. Ecstasy waited again like wine at her closed lips. She could gulp it down, a madness to consume them both.

The eyelids flickered in her calm face. Looking at her, he saw nothing but her beauty, a serene childlike beauty of quiet eyes and wide fine-pointed mouth.

When he spoke she held herself a little aloof, hoarding her strength. It was easy to talk to him while he stayed at the other side of the room. His voice might thrust into her its intimate sweetness, but let him keep away and he would not know that she was faint for a remembered caress. He would go away—not to come back—and again she would escape from herself and from this violence lurking in her, driving her towards his annihilating desire.

"The story is two years old," he said, "and yet it does not bore you."

"You are so sure of that," she murmured.

"I am not a fool."

He stopped in his even, silent pacing and faced her.

"My dear," he said mildly, "why do you keep me away, torturing both of us? When I left you—two years ago—I did not mean to come back. But you did not let me go. You kept me in your thoughts. They pursued me over half the world.

Does that sound absurd to you? I should have held it absurd—two years ago. But now I know it to be possible. Your thoughts disturbed me. They woke me at night, on ships in strange seas, and when I lay rolled in my blankets under the stars of my own country. If you didn't want me, why didn't you let me go? Why did your thoughts remember me if your body forgot?"

She drew a short quick breath. "I did not know that I had so wanton a mind."

"You talked a deal," he said relentlessly, "of fair dealing for Richard. Is it fair to lie beside your husband and think on another man? Would Richard have thanked you for such fair dealing?"

Her widening eyes held him away. "Richard did not know."

"Do you suppose he never felt the loss? Did you think you could betray him in your thoughts and he not feel the bitterness of that treachery, as I felt its maddening allure? You know better than that. In so far as you let a power go out of you to hold me, you drew away from him, loosening your hold, thrusting him away. Don't you know it?"

Within a foot of her he halted abruptly, his whole will bent on the need to keep himself in that posture of false ease. If he touched her now he would crush her. The force pent up in him for two years would break into an uncontrollable raging. Surely she could hear the effort of his heart that made his breath a sword. He must keep still, while the strength ebbed out of him to



touch her and returned upon him in a monstrous rhythm of joy and pain.

She did not understand. She even touched his arm in a gesture of entreaty. He found himself resenting her foolishness, that asked too much of him.

"Don't do that," he said harshly. "If you touch me, we shall both go up in flames."

She drew back at that, and he saw that she was afraid. The sight of her fear calmed him suddenly. He sat down again, in front of her, and regarded curiously his own firm short hands. They could have crushed her so easily, as easily as they might have caressed her, searching in the curves of her body for the secret of their power over him.

"Are you afraid of me, Jane?" he said softly. "You need not be. I will be gentle with you always. You know it. I could take you now. I have only to touch you, and you would forget all this talk of pity and fair dealing. It would fall into nothing. But you see that I am not touching you. I am leaving you free, because it is your will that must answer me. As your body answers mine."

She was silent still, and he forgot her beauty in a sudden breathless thought of what it would become at his touch.

"It does answer," he repeated gravely. "You know that it does. And since you care like that, why do you withhold yourself? For a word. For a dream."

"For a dream," she said. "Oh, David."

She began to talk with a soft urgency. The

effort of finding words for the emotions that stupefied her, helped, steadying her voice.

"For a dream," she repeated softly. "David, listen. It is indeed because of a dream. No new dream, my David, but one that was born when Richard and I met. We were young. I was eighteen when he married me, six years ago, and he two years older. We were in love: oh, more than that. We were love itself, the sharp sweet love that comes once, and only to youth. Often it dies, but we cherished it and hid it warm in our hearts. We have grown so much into each other that we could not live apart. Richard is my girlhood, my faith in life, my very heart's joy. And I—why, I am in his heart, safe from any hurting thing. Oh, you don't know how safe! You call it a dream, but my life is rooted in it, with his. We shall go through life in its remembered sweetness. Do you think I could let myself spoil that?"

She was flushed and triumphant as if she stood on the far side of those perilous waters.

"You think like that," he said slowly. "And yet you have remembered me for two years. And now—yes, just now—you were mine."

She shook her head. "It is not I who desire you," she said, painfully. "It is something in me, that is fierce and greedy. I do not know what it is nor why your voice and the sight of you should rouse it. But I know that it is not good, as the dream is good."

"It is the real you," he said violently. "The other—bemused with dreams—is a girl. I do

## TALE OF SOLITARY ENGLISH GIRL

not want a girl. I want the woman that you are."

At the touch of his hands she closed her eyes. She made no effort to escape, but swayed against him. Only when he bent his mouth to hers the wide lids opened, and her face blazed with joy made visible.

He hesitated, dazed by the revelation, and in that instant her face changed.

With an adroit movement she slipped out of his arms and stood with hands outstretched to keep him off.

"David, let me go. We shouldn't be happy, you and I. You would want other women, and I should be hurt and hurt you. No—don't deceive yourself and me. You have always wanted other women. You would not keep faith with me."

"You talk as if faith were the only thing in the world." The destroying pain of his body made speech difficult. Again he kept himself still. Above all, he must not frighten her, or she would lose her head, and he would take her and hurt her, made mad by her terror.

"There might be other women," he got out at last. "I do not know. I am a man, like other men. But they would be only women—and you would be my wife. Richard would make that easy for us."

"Ah no——"

The cry that escaped her was his complete answer, but he dared not accept it.

"Jane," he said. "My love, look at me. Do

not fail me—and yourself—now. I can give you more than a faithful body, more than a dream. I can give you a joy you never imagined, and the madness of life filled to the brim with living. Oh, you might be hurt, you might suffer, but at least you would be alive. You know that I love you. I shall love you until I die. I should not love them—the others. No man can love two women at one time, though men have deluded themselves with that romantic notion. What one gets is stolen from t'other. I should give nothing to my women: I should not even lie to you about them."

There was one wide step between them, and he took it. He felt her body flutter in his grasp. Her beauty filled him to the throat, so that he shuddered a little, unconscious that he held her with fierce hands that hurt. "Jane! Oh, my God, Jane! If you won't come to me, give me one night, one day and night out of a lifetime, your life and mine."

He saw her face then, and let her go. She stood with hands at her throat.

"There is no one night for you and me," she said. He bent his head to catch the words. "It is nothing—or all. I must go. I was mad to come." Her dilated eyes did not falter before the flame of his. "There will be no thoughts, this time, to draw you across the world. I have got my freedom of you. Take yours of me."

She had to wait for his answer.

"And if there were, I should not come again," he said steadily. "There is a point beyond which

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passion ceases to endure—a man's passion, at any rate. You have pushed me to that point. I could not take you now."

Jane hurried through the streets. She wanted swift movement to outstrip the scattering fury of her thoughts. When she reached her sister's house, she was glad to step from the sunlight into the vast quiet room. Virginia was curled up on a couch. She lifted her pointed face and regarded Jane curiously.

"Well?" she said. Her wide eyes mocked Jane's gravity.

Jane laughed, and made no other answer.

"I suppose you have sent him away," Virginia observed. "You are a fool. He is worth ten of Richard."

Jane laughed again, softly. "David goes to my head," she murmured. "But only when he is with me. He will not trouble my thoughts. *That* fire is burned out."

She was sorry for Virginia, whose husband bored her, as who would not be bored with that flat face and solemn in dignity of paunch? Jane remembered Richard's smooth youth, and pity for Virginia rose to her lips as she touched them to Virginia's cheek.

Virginia sat up. "You are a fool," she repeated softly. "But you are a dear fool. I will kill Richard if he hurts you."

"Richard will not hurt me in anything that matters."

Her happiness, naked and unashamed on her radiant face, woke the other's malice.

"I think you are too sure and too careful of Richard," she said, deliberately. "Men do not like to have their faithfulness taken for granted: neither do they like to be petted and mothered overmuch. Their vanity suffers, and they sometimes take odd means to discover whether their faithfulness is indeed appreciated."

"You are bitter, my Virginia."

"I am awake. Men are mean. Oh, women are mean too, but in other ways. Men have a nostalgia for the gutter, and most of them contrive to indulge it, at one time or another."

"Oh," Jane said.

She did not say, "Not Richard," because she would not expose herself to Virginia's scorn, but her flickering smile betrayed her.

"Did you tell Richard why you were coming up to town?" her sister asked cruelly.

Jane flushed.

"No," she murmured. "But I shall tell him. It will be easy enough, now that it is over." She added defiantly: "There was nothing to tell."

David was right. Her thoughts, of which she had been hardly aware, were a treachery. Richard had felt it. She recalled days and moods when she had not been able to touch him; in some fashion he had withdrawn from her. It was the subtlest of constraints, but it had existed, coming and going. Simple now, and very sweet, to wave it aside. She would cry a little, and implore Richard, "Do you indeed love me?"—and he would comfort her, looking at her with candid eyes that shamed her duplicity.

## TALE OF SOLITARY ENGLISH GIRL ♣

As the afternoon wore on, she grew restless and impatient. The madness that David had stirred swept through her when she thought of her husband. With a deliberate pleasure she called up the image of herself lying in her bed, Richard's arms flung round her and desire coming down upon them like a wild thing. She shivered, and her breath faltered in her throat.

She sought Virginia, standing before her with subdued defiance. "Virginia," she said. "I think I'd like to go home now, rather than wait till to-morrow."

Virginia hid her smile. "But I was coming back with you," she observed. "Do I follow you?"

"No, come with me now," Jane said.

She had happiness enough to spare its crumbs for Virginia. Her joy in Richard would be the sharper that she must hide it from Virginia's cool eyes. When at last they were alone, he would take her with the boyish mischievous smile that died swiftly as his mouth shut on hers and his eyes looked down at her in a grave absorption.

In the train she dreamed, her hand hiding her face from Virginia's candid mockery. Her happiness grew until she could scarcely breathe. It swelled in her throat, a secret painful ecstasy. The years of marriage dropped away, and she was that girl who had gone gallantly, head up, to her young lover. She recalled the ways of that eager boy. He had liked to lie beside her in the long grass of the walled orchard. He said that it made him one with all the gay company of lovers who had enjoyed

their ladies in the star-pricked darkness, praying the night to be tardy that gave them soft lips, cool hands, and a tender body for benison.

Jane shut her lips on the joyous laughter that rose to them.

When they reached the little station the chauffeur said that Richard was away, and she stood still in the shock of disappointment. An abrupt consciousness of Virginia's sympathy steadied her to ask when he had gone. "Yesterday," the man told her. "I drove him to catch the down train, an hour after you left."

At that, violent relief mastered her. He had not followed her to London. During the short drive, she abandoned herself to a shamed unhappiness. The depth of her treachery frightened her.

"I wanted to tell him about David, to-night," she said suddenly.

Virginia shrugged. "You are like the rest of us, my dear, for all your quaint simplicity. You revel in painful scenes."

But Virginia herself was pleased when Richard's wire commanded his car for the last train. She watched Jane with eyes that had forgotten their unhappy malice. Once she sighed, and said, sharply, "Don't flaunt your joy in my face, Jane. You're hardly decent." But she smiled at her own words and came lazily to kiss the restless girl.

Jane wandered from her room to Richard's. She stood for a moment beside his bed, and then, opening a drawer, began foolishly to rearrange it. Richard hated to see her about his things, so that she indulged stealthily her need to do for him



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small personal services that no other woman might do.

When she came upon three letters tucked underneath a pile of garments she looked at them with puzzled interest, fingering them vaguely. Abruptly, a dizzy excitement thrust into her. Why was Richard keeping letters in that place? She smoothed out the sheets with a hand that shook, and as she read she grew very cold and a sick pain filled her so that she shivered, swaying against the wall. The words of the letters became a meaningless chaos, from which phrases rose and stabbed her afresh: "Dearest, you know that I want you always when you come." And another: "I do understand that you love your wife, and I feel no jealousy of her. She is more beautiful than I am, and clever, and of your class, but I think I give you something that she does not—a madness, perhaps, that you had not imagined." And farther down the page, words that stirred the dull pain to an agony. The blood drove through her so that she could neither see nor hear. She thought that she cried out, but no sound came between her tortured lips.

"It was very wonderful to lie beside you in the orchard. When I am lonely I recall your face, so pale and grave in that cool dusk. But it is too dangerous. Do not make me come there again."

There was nothing left then, nothing. All had been taken from her, to the last secret things. She stood naked, cowering under the lash of his hidden thoughts. It was she who had come naked

before his mistress. Her intimate life had been opened to that curious gaze.

She was sick with shame, sick and reeling in a desolation more frightful than anything she had conceived.

He had done this to her, the grave tender boy whose body she had worshipped. She was beaten to the ground, humbled as none else could have so humbled her.

"Is it pride, then, that hurts like this?" Her lips parted in difficult speech.

"If it is pride, I am dying of it," she cried terribly.

Virginia's light step sounded outside the room, and Virginia's voice rose above the pain that blew round and through her like a wind. She gasped, and it snatched the breath from her mouth.

Virginia knocked. Jane pushed the letters into the drawer and walked across the room. "Come in," she said.

Virginia came in. Her glance flickered over Jane's face. It was white and remote and the eyes were empty. "Something has happened to her," she thought, and her heart failed.

Jane's voice was level. "What did you want?" she asked.

Virginia lost her head at that thin sound. She tried to take Jane's hand, but the girl showed a quiet resentment.

"I've forgotten," Virginia stammered. "There was something I wanted."

"I'll come down with you," Jane said calmly.

They walked towards the door. Virginia,

miserably conscious of her blunder, went quickly. At the door she turned. Jane was standing motionless in the middle of the room, her hands held stiffly by her side and her head flung back. She looked as if she were dying for want of air. A strange rasping sound broke through her, tearing its way through her straining body. For a moment after Virginia reached her, she kept herself in that rigid vacancy, and then cry followed harsh cry, choking up through the lifted throat. Virginia held her, taking the violent shudderings against herself, touching the blind senseless thing with useless fingers. The sleeves of Jane's thin gown clung to her arms, wet with the sweat of anguish. Desperate and quiet, Virginia waited for minute after minute.

At last Jane lay still and spent in her sister's arms. Virginia spoke softly. "Oh, don't, my dear, don't. It's not worth it. Men are all like that."

"You knew?"

"As soon as I saw you."

Jane drew back from the edge of that pity.

"You should not have been here," she said. "It makes things harder. Will you go now?"

When Virginia had gone, Jane opened the drawer and stood with the letters in her hand. Thoughts came and went, emptying their bitterness into her. He had crept from bed to bed, coming from the other woman's body to press himself to hers. So he would have come to her to-night. She would have spread her joy before his eyes that had but just looked on the other's joy of lifted face and

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shaken limbs. She covered her face, groaning in the travail of her shame.

She was that poorest thing, the wife deceived. Jest was made of her. Songs were sung of her. She was mocked and held for the laughter of fools.

Richard would be sorry for her wretchedness.

How should she tell him then? Her eyes sought the letter. "It was wonderful to lie beside you in the orchard."

"Your love-making lacks originality," she would say, and laugh a little, holding out the fatal page. Desolation swept down upon her at the sound of her voice repeating the malicious words.

She had not caught the sounds of his arrival, but she heard his footsteps now in the corridor. He stood in the doorway, and her eyes turned aside, seeing even in that ebb of her forces the charm of his faun's mouth and wide lifted brow. Her lips moved soundlessly in the phrases she had prepared, but from her dry throat came only a cracked murmur. "It is all spoiled," she said, and fell into hopeless weeping, while he stood looking from her face to the letter in her hand.

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ENCLOSURE II.—The story found among the papers of the late Mark Withershaw, the well-known novelist of the seventies, and entitled by his brother—James Withershaw—

## A VICTORIAN TALE

# A VICTORIAN TALE

By MICHAEL SADLEIR

IN his little study with its view over grey-green grass to the scattered tombstones of the churchyard the old vicar listened in silence to the pleading of his wife.

"Very well," he said at last, "I will ask her. But she will not like it. She would prefer me to go away altogether."

"John," replied his wife gently, "you will never admit your qualities. She is a hard woman and proud, but she loves you as well as any in the parish. Dr. Wells has said you must have three months' rest. Three months! Surely that is not much to ask?"

He smiled and patted the softly wrinkled hand that lay upon his knee.

"Dear Mary! I am nothing to her beyond a fixed element in Windlesham. Because I have been here years, she likes me, but any other would do as well. If I retire, she will resent the change, but settle down soon enough to a new permanence. If, however, I suggest a substitute for three months——! You know how she is, even with temporary tenants on the estate——"

Mrs. Headicar sighed.

"I will go instead of you," she suggested.

But he shook his head and, rising wearily from his chair, looked about for coat and hat.

"No, no. I will ask. She can but say no."

Behind the high windows of the castle morning-room two ladies sat over their breakfast.

"The vicar has asked to see me at ten o'clock," said the elder.

"What about, mother?"

"I have no idea. Some new misbehaviour among the mill-hands, I expect. They are a troublesome lot. Windlesham was happier without them."

Conversation lapsed. Then the younger woman leant forward and touched with her fingers a white rose which shone against the black satin of her mother's dress.

"Why so smart, mother? You do not wear flowers as a rule."

"It is Agatha's birthday," replied the old lady simply.

Her daughter flushed with embarrassment.

"How stupid of me! Forgive me, darling!"

Quickly she rose and, passing behind her mother's chair, laid her cheek on the carefully waved white hair.

"Forgive me," she murmured again.

The old lady patted brusquely the hand that caressed her shoulder.

"There is no question of forgiveness, Sally. I do not expect others to remember. Perhaps I should do better to forget myself."

Her voice was steady and her eyes were veiled, as always, by the mesh of her proud reserve. Without another word she left the table and walked quickly from the room.

The Reverend John Headicar made his way slowly up the street toward the castle gates. To the remote township of Windlesham he had given the best years of his life, tending the souls of its people according to the simple recipes of his faith. At first his parishioners had been mainly farmers and farm labourers. Then the old stone mill by the river had been restarted, and John Headicar had found fresh scope for charity and patience among a new and more turbulent population attracted to the place by the demand for industrial labour. Once again devotion and the radiance of a guileless mind had won for him respect and affection. The vicar was beloved by his parishioners for the unselfish, unassuming man he was, and, if the rougher of the young men and the shriller of the mill girls were seldom seen at church, they and theirs were little less cordial in welcoming the grey-haired clergyman to their crowded homes than were those who formed regular part of his congregation.

Had Windlesham consisted merely of schoolmaster and doctor, of a handful of small bourgeois and farmers, of labourers and their families, of the more recent colony of mill workers, John Headicar's life work might more openly have shown the fullness of achievement; would in any event have proved less laborious in the performance. But

there was another element beside the inhabitants of the tiny town and of the scattered farmhouses in its neighbourhood. On the rising slope to eastward stood the castle, its great gates dominating the main street, its flat many-windowed façade so set along the grey flank of the down as to catch the glow of the setting sun and blazon forth in letters of flame the agelong motto of feudal lordship. Every blade of grass, every mossgrown tile in Windlesham belonged to the castle, and the castle itself belonged to one who allowed neither herself nor her dependents to forget the power and privilege of possession.

Eglantine, Dowager Marchioness of Rhianver, was in her own right Countess of Windlesham. When her husband died and the marquisate with all its Welsh revenues passed to a third cousin, Lady Rhianver established herself in her own castle of Windlesham and shut out from her new life all memory of the old.

It had meant little of happiness, that old life, for her husband had been for years before his death partially paralysed, her only son had died in infancy, and of her two daughters one was lost to her. Wherefore she came gladly enough to her own place, there, in the dignified seclusion suited to her unbending nature, to live out the loneliness that fate had decreed for her. For fifteen years, solitary, unloved, her isolation broken by occasional visits from her married daughter, she had ruled over Windlesham. Maybe the benefits of her dominance outweighed the gall of her despotism. Certain it is, however, that



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her insistent presence made doubly difficult the life work of John Headicar, who was compelled to render to feudalism the things that were feudal, and at the same time, in the lives of those about him, to remedy as best he might the evils of its ruthlessness.

But now at long last the toil of mediation had worn him out and, with the nervous misery of the unselfish man forced to beg on his own behalf, he rang at the porticoed front door and sought admittance, by appointment, to the presence of his patroness.

She rose to greet him, an upright figure, clothed richly but simply in black, her white hair dressed high on her unbending head, a single white rose pinned to the bosom of her gown.

"Good morning, Mr. Headicar. You wish to ask me something?"

Still standing, he began in a low voice to tell of his unfitness for continued work.

"I am ashamed," he concluded, "to confess my feebleness. But I am convinced that at present I am not doing my duty as it needs to be done."

While he was speaking she had made no movement, nor had word nor sound of sympathy escaped her. As he fell silent, she seated herself and looked him keenly in the face.

"I am sorry," she said formally, "that you are unwell. You wish to resign the parish altogether?"

He faltered a little.

"Well—personally—it had been my first idea—but my wife, Lady Rhianver—in fact we should

both feel it very grievous to leave Windlesham. Dr. Wells says three or six months away would set me up. Perhaps you would consider a locum tenens. . . ."

She frowned.

"You know I dislike temporary arrangements," she said coldly. "Such a plan would mean that for three or six months the place would virtually be uncared for. I could not trust a locum tenens, and it would not be worth while to instruct him."

With a sigh the vicar drew himself up.

"Then I suppose I shall have to ask leave to resign," he said. "I will write you a formal letter."

And he turned to go.

"Wait a moment. It is a little sudden, Mr. Headicar. You have been here so many years that I cannot in a minute visualise the place without you. How is a locum tenens found? I understand the bishop can be asked for someone special, but, failing that, his lordship will select the man who most conveniently occurs to him. I know of no one I could ask to come. Am I to allow some stranger, chosen by hazard, to take charge of Windlesham for half a year? It is out of the question, Mr. Headicar. You must see that it is out of the question."

"I had no idea of making such a proposal," he replied, warmly. "I know your care for the people and I know my own love for them. No substitute must come to Windlesham of whom we know nothing."

"Then you have someone in mind?"

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"As it happens—yes. My old friend, the vicar of St. Catherine's, North Kensington, wrote to me not long ago about one of his curates. He said that in this young man the spirit of our Lord was indeed wonderfully strong, so that even among the worst characters of the parish (and it is a very rough place) he is venerated as a saint. But the boy is ill with overwork. He spends his time in fetid air and will not care for his own comfort or well-being. He must be got away for a while. My friend told me much about this young man—something of his parentage and the strange circumstances of his taking orders—and last night the idea came to me that if your ladyship would consent to his coming here, the change might not only save a very noble life, but bring to Windlesham qualities of Christian endeavour that I cannot claim to possess."

"This young man—does he want to go permanently to a country parish?"

Mr. Headicar smiled a little sadly.

"Did he so desire, I hope that I should not hesitate in making way for him. But he is wedded to London—will only leave it for a few months, and that under compulsion."

For a while the marchioness sat silent. She was now gazing away from him through the tall window to the right.

"All this makes a difference," she said at last. "Tell me about this wonderful young man."

"His name," began the vicar, "is Alfred Bostock——"

Lady Rhianver turned her head sharply.

"What name?"

John Headicar noted with surprise the sudden curiosity of his listener. He repeated what he had said. The marchioness turned away again with an absent nod of the head.

"Ah yes—I did not hear. Go on."

"He came one day on foot to Clandon—the big theological college near Colchester—and begged to see the Warden. He explained that he had tramped from London because he wished to become a priest, that life in a poor quarter had proved to him——"

"Yes, yes!" interrupted the old lady. "Tell me that afterwards. Did he say who he was, where he came from?"

"He is the son," replied the vicar, "of some actor or teacher of elocution. The father seems to have been a bad lot——"

Lady Rhianver had risen suddenly to her feet.

"Are his parents dead?" she asked, with a quietness more emotional than any ferocity.

"I—I do not know," said John Headicar. "I believe the father is, but—I could find out if your ladyship——"

"No matter." She walked away from him and stood for a moment by the fireplace, looking down into the flaming coals. There was a pause. Then:

"I am interested in what you tell me, Mr. Headicar," she said. "I will agree to this Mr.—this young man coming here while you are away. Please arrange it quickly. Good morning."

He bowed, embarrassed and astonished at the

spasmodic abruptness of one customarily so controlled. As he was leaving the room, she called to him.

"Mr. Headicar, you will regard the payment of your substitute as my affair. The income from the parish will be yours entirely, as in normal circumstances. No need to thank me"—as he gestured appreciation. "We all owe to you and to your wife the little we can repay. Good morning again."

In something of a daze the vicar made his way home, to tell Mrs. Headicar of his strange interview and to borrow of his old friend by letter a curate as locum tenens.

It was a quarter of an hour after the vicar had left the castle that Lady Rhianver's married daughter came in search of her mother. She found the marchioness seated in an arm-chair by the window of the small library, her fingers playing idly with a paper knife, her features frozen into a mask of reverie. When her daughter spoke, she turned her head composedly and began immediately to speak in a voice of cold monotony.

"Something very strange has happened," she said. And she related what had passed between herself and the vicar. "One would hardly believe it possible," she concluded. "After all these years. . . ."

"But, mother dear, it can only be a coincidence. Do not form hopes that cannot be fulfilled. The name is not so uncommon. . . ."

"I am quite sure," replied the old lady calmly.

"There cannot be two Bostocks that were actors and teachers of acting. I refuse to believe there can be two. And now that horrible man is dead—the man that bewitched my Agatha—and—and—Oh, Sally!" she burst out, and the sudden emphasis after her quiet indifference gave to her voice a strident quality that wrung the heart of her hearer, "Sally, don't you realise that this is Agatha's son. The young clergyman is coming to his grandmother? At last—at last—the gap in my heart is to be filled!"

"Dear, dear mother, calm yourself! With all my heart I pray you may be right. But you will harm yourself by this excitement. Listen, I will go to London to-day and find this young man. I will find out all about him, and if it is as you believe I will come back with him at once. If not—well, then, I must try to comfort you as best I may."

"No, no!" cried the old lady. "No one must see him before I do. He is my boy! He is my darling's child! Besides——" with a sudden drop to uncanny whispering—"besides, he may tell *me* where his mother is, and he would not tell that to a stranger. His mother is probably alive. Agatha is alive! Alive . . . alive!"

In a paroxysm of hysterical delight she threw back her head and lay, shaking with dreadful laughter, in her chair by the high library window.

Her daughter and the servants got her to bed. The doctor was sent for, but by the time he reached the castle Lady Rhianver was her usual calm self

again and resentfully defiant of enforced convalescence.

Next day a telegram from Dorset summoned home the marchioness's visitor. No further mention was made of the suggested journey to London.

"Good-bye, Sally," said the mother. "Thank you for coming, and let me know how matters are at home. I am quite well again now. You shall hear about Alfred when he comes."

Alfred Bostock was nearing the end of his first evening sermon in Windlesham Church. He had only arrived the day before, and it was with real curiosity that, on this occasion as already at morning service, he scanned the faces of his new congregation. How they differed from those to whom he was accustomed! How unquestioning and simple and healthy they looked in contrast to the wizened pallor and ill-thriven cunning of the men and women of the slum parish of St. Catherine's. One by one he studied them, as, from his heart and speaking without notes, he told them something of the life and struggle of great cities. Pew by pew he conducted his examination, appraising and judging each face, the while with simple eloquence he told of what he knew so well. It was, by the hazard of his chosen progression, only a few moments before the end of his sermon that he reached in his survey of the church the south transept that lay across the chancel to his left. He saw a grille of heavily carved oak balusters, behind which, in the dim light of a single lamp,

a solitary figure could be seen, black-veiled and motionless.

"And now to God the Father . . ." With bowed head and body turned to the altar he waited for the scraping of feet and shuffle of hymn books to sink into silence.

By the time the service was over all memory had left him of the sombre richness of the private pew, of the lonely dignity of that unyielding figure. Wherefore he was greatly amazed to receive in the vestry a visit from a liveried groom. The man touched his hat.

"Beg pardon, sir. Her ladyship would wish to speak to you."

Bostock smiled inquiry. "Her ladyship? I am ready now. Will she come in?"

"Her ladyship is in her carriage and begs you to speak to her there."

"Then you must wait a moment for me to put my things away and lock up the church. Please tell her ladyship I will be with her in two minutes."

Hat in hand he stood at the open door of a small brougham that waited at the churchyard gate. From the blackness of the interior came a woman's voice.

"Get in, Mr. Bostock. I want you to dine with me this evening."

The note of command was unmistakable. Murmuring thanks, he climbed into the brougham. The door was closed from without and he was carried smoothly into the night. Not a word was spoken. As his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness he could make out the dim outline of his



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companion. Clearly the figure was the same as that behind the grille in the south transept. "This is the chatelaine," he said to himself, and was on the whole content thus early to become acquainted with one who was perforce a power in Windlesham.

Arrived at the castle, he saw little of his hostess but her cloak, as, muffled to the eyes, she passed up the steps and hurried across the hall. The butler relieved him of coat and hat; conducted him to hot water, soap, and towels, and, toilet completed, led him to the long drawing-room, in which a fire burnt gloriously.

"Her ladyship will be down directly, sir."

Glad of a moment's respite, Alfred Bostock looked about him. The room was tall with sumptuous panelling and a ceiling heavily ornate with garlands and other plaster-work. The white painted walls rose from flooring polished to brilliance, upon which fine and sombre rugs lay in orderly profusion. The furniture was for the most part in mahogany, carved and polished, but a few satinwood chairs and two card-tables, inlaid and painted, shone like old amber among their darker fellows.

There was a rustle of silk, and a tall old lady, with white hair and eyes aloof but courteous, came forward to greet him.

"You will forgive my unceremonious invitation, Mr. Bostock. I am Lady Rhianver and, as Windlesham is my home, I was anxious to make the acquaintance of our new clergyman."

As she spoke her eyes never left his face. They

were inexpressive eyes, but behind their bleakness he felt the power of veiled but searching scrutiny. At dinner, with the easy candour of one whose soul is clear, he talked of London and his work. His hostess responded graciously.

The meal passed with good humour and content. It was when the servants had left the drawing-room, after handing coffee, that she refused for the first time to follow his lead in conversation. He was venturing an opinion on denominational effort in poor parishes, but she cut him short.

"Listen to me," she said suddenly. "Your father was an actor, was he not?"

Rather surprised, the young man nodded.

"At one time, yes. But he got little enough to do, and returned to his old employment of teaching elocution and training amateurs."

"His name was Alexander?"

"Yes."

"He was tall and red-haired?"

"Yes."

"What kind of a man was he?"

"A very handsome man—until—— No, he was a good-looking man."

"Was he a *good* man?"

"You will pardon me, Lady Rhianver, but I cannot abuse my father. I am sure that on many of the occasions that he went astray the fault was not so much his as that of others."

"And your—mother?"

There was a break in the voice as this question was asked. Bostock noticed signs of growing agitation in his hostess. Eager to find some means

of changing the subject of conversation, he did not at once reply.

"Your mother?" came the query, sharply, impatiently repeated.

"I am even less desirous of discussing my mother, Lady Rhianver," he replied in a low voice.

"Why? Why 'even less'?" Her impatience crumbled into wistfulness. "I am not quite myself. You must forgive a tired old woman—her—impertinence. Tell me just this—is she alive?"

He nodded.

"Where——" She checked herself and after a struggle mastered her agitation. "I should like to see her." She spoke now with something approaching her usual calm grandeur. "Please write to her to come here."

He sat silent, uneasy and amazed.

"Well? You will do this, Mr. Bostock, because I ask you. I am accustomed to have my way in Windlesham, and it is a small thing to ask a man to invite his mother on a visit. Promise me you will do this!"

Rising, he looked her in the face.

"I do not understand, Lady Rhianver. You are cruel, but I think you do not know it. Also I feel that your mind is tortured in this matter, although I know not how or why. Can you give me a reason that I should ask my mother to come here?"

She walked toward the door, speaking as she walked, but without turn or motion of the head.

"Do as I ask and you shall have reason and to

spare. I am not well and must leave you now. Andrews will show you where to smoke and bring all you ask for, if you care to sit awhile." An idea seemed to strike her. She stood at the door and faced him—"Yes—you shall stay and write from here to bid your mother come, on notepaper that Andrews will fetch you. That will be a good plan. Good night, Mr. Bostock."

Alone in the shining spaces of the drawing-room, the young man stood and pondered, until pity for her lonely pride conquered his dislike.

"So be it," he said to himself. "I will do as she asks."

A small boy brought a note to the castle and waited for an answer.

"DEAR LADY RHIANVER,

"My mother arrives this afternoon.

"Yours very truly,

"ALFRED BOSTOCK."

The answer read as tersely :

"DEAR MR. BOSTOCK,

"I expect you both at six o'clock.

"EGLANTINE RHIANVER."

The marchioness was never more wilful. Tea must be ready in the long saloon at six. No—she would take her tea alone upstairs at five. No again—the visitors must be shown to the small drawing-room and she would send down to Mrs.

Bostock to come upstairs. No once more—better to see the young man first. No finally—let matters arrange themselves; she would give orders later.

The servants, tired with answering impatient bells, shrugged shoulders wearily. "Bit off this afternoon," remarked the younger footman. Andrews frowned reprovingly.

"Her ladyship is frequently a little difficult," he said.

At last the deep clang of the front door bell sounded down the flagged passages of the servants' quarter. Straightening his coat, the butler sailed impressively across the hall.

Before he could reach the door his mistress, calling sharply from the bend of the great staircase, fetched him back.

"Andrews," she said, "you will show Mr. and Mrs. Bostock to the long drawing-room. You will then ask the lady to forgive me for five minutes and bring Mr. Bostock to my own room."

"Very good, my lady."

"When I ring, bring Mrs. Bostock upstairs at once. At *once*—do you understand?"

"Very good, my lady."

Alfred Bostock closed the door behind him and stood awaiting explanation of his hostess's strange summons.

"You asked to see me, Lady Rhianver. . . ."

She hurried to greet him, took his two hands in hers and gazed earnestly in his face.

"Yes—I wished to see you—alone. In a moment I will see—your mother. But I have

something to tell you, something that will make clear why I have behaved thus oddly. There——! Sit down. You must doubt my sanity? ”

The young man, more mystified than ever, murmured a formal negative. Nevertheless, seated uncomfortably on an upright chair, he asked himself to what this seeming lunacy was tending. The marchioness began to speak.

“ Listen to me, boy. I am going to tell you a story. Long ago I had two daughters. One I still have, and she is dear to me. The other I have lost, and her I loved more than the world. She was dark and slim and mischievous, and her spirit was the high untamable spirit of the stock from which she had sprung. I spoiled her. After I had lost her, I came to see that I had spoiled her, to see that the sorrow that came upon me was of my own making. It was in London first that she took a craze for acting. You are too young to realise how exceptional and shocking it was then thought for girls of noble family to mix with actors and actresses. You must believe me when I tell you that only a mother madly fond would have countenanced what I countenanced in Agatha. She had the idea of producing a play in Wales——(my husband was alive in those days, and we spent some part of the year in Plas Colyn)——with a professional instructor and a few professional performers. Like the fool I was, I smiled and let her go her way. She collected her friends and chose her play and invited those of the expert theatrical world that it pleased her to invite. They came to Wales and set eagerly to work. The

stage manager was your father—do not interrupt me! I must tell my story to the end—and, as you once said yourself, he was in those days a very handsome man. You can guess the rest? How far the intimacy had gone in London I do not know. Certainly he and Agatha were not strangers when the last Welsh phase began. He bewitched her—bewitched her, boy—and—when the play was over——”

Alfred Bostock started to his feet. The old lady, a hand to her throat, seemed in danger of choking. She was pale as death and reeled against the table. With his arm he supported her.

“Please, Lady Rhianver, I beg of you not to tell me this. My mother——”

The words rallied her distracted senses. A gleam of triumph shone in her tired eyes. With a sudden movement she escaped his arm and moved steadily to the fireplace. He saw her jerk the bell-rope, heard the bell’s voice sound distantly. Then she turned and began to speak rapidly:

“I am better. We have only a few moments now, and I must finish my tale quickly. Agatha ran away with this man—with your father—leaving a note to say they were to marry, that she could not hope for my forgiveness or for her father’s, but she loved him well enough to give up home and friends and all the joys and power of her position, to be his wife and look after him and share his work. According to the standards of those days she had done an unforgivable thing. She had betrayed her caste and tarnished her father’s

name. He swore that to him for ever she was dead. He forbade my searching for her, even trying to get news of her. But secretly I disobeyed. I searched and advertised and searched again, but all in vain. She had disappeared. And then this amazing chance of your acquaintance! Now you understand? Now you realise that I am not mad, save with delight at seeing you, who are my grandson, and your mother—who—is——”

She stopped abruptly as the door latch rattled and the door swung slowly open.

“My Agatha!” cried the old lady, and tottered forward.

In the doorway stood a short stout woman, her face lined beneath its powder, her hair, sourly yellow, piled to either side of a gaudy hat. With mouth open in amazement she stared at the tall, black-gowned figure that swayed uncertainly in the centre of the room. Behind her stupefaction the door closed silently.

For a second the marchioness stood as though rooted to the ground, her body reeling slightly, her arms stretched stupidly toward the newcomer. Then she turned to Alfred Bostock.

“But—this is not——”

He moved to support her to a chair, but at his touch she shrank away.

“How dare you!” she broke out in fury. “How dare you bring that creature here! Where is my child? Where is Agatha?”

“Lady Rhianver,” he cried, imploringly. “I swear to you this is my mother. Of the story you have told me I know nothing. I tried to



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say so, but you prevented me. It is all a horrible confusion. Let us go and never trouble you again."

The woman who had gazed from one to the other, tongue-tied with genuine astonishment, now regained the ready impudence of her class.

"What the hell is all this?" she demanded. "Alfred, if you've brought me here to make a fool of me, I'll let you know it. As for the old lady—who does she want anyway, with her 'Agathas' and her hoity-toity tempers."

Lady Rhianver had groped her way to a chair and now sat, pitifully quiet, under the strident emphasis of the other's indignation. Before Alfred Bostock could reply, she raised her hand to bid him be silent.

"One moment," she said dully. "I should like to ask Mrs. Bostock a question, and also to apologise to her for the very painful scene in which, by my own folly, I have involved her. First of all, madam, the apology. Will you show me the courtesy so far to overlook what has occurred as to allow me to ask you something?"

The visitor threw up her head and then allowed it to settle pompously into the cheap furs that hung about her shoulders.

"A civil question deserves a civil answer, I suppose," she observed, "though I may say I don't fancy being made a fool of. I'm for toddling out of this, sharp as may be, so we'll have the query here and now, if you *don't* mind. Whether I answer or not depends, of course."

"I will not waste time," said the marchioness,

coldly, "and I will try not to be too personal. I used to know your husband, Mrs. Bostock. Perhaps you would not mind telling me how long ago you were married to him?"

"How long? Good Lord, since the Flood! Must be thirty years ago if it's a day. I was married at sixteen, you know. And I'm older than I look. Which is a marvel, you know, when you come to think what I've been through. No joke, marrying Alec Bostock, you can take it from me."

"Thirty years?" repeated Lady Rhianver in a voice so low that it was almost a whisper. "Thirty years. . . . Two more questions—if I may. Did your husband—was he—were there ever—other women——?"

"Ah!" the widow raised her hands in mock dismay. "Others? You bet your life! Faithfulness wasn't Alec's strong suit. Not that I minded much after some years. You get used to anything, don't you? Still, I'm glad Alfred's a good boy."

With a supreme effort the marchioness brought herself to a final probing of her own agony.

"I have done," she interrupted, "in one moment I have done. Did you ever hear tell of a Lady Agatha Grant-Charteris?—that is to say—among the women he—had to do with——"

Mrs. Bostock drew down the corners of her mouth in an effort of memory.

"Grant-Charteris?" she repeated. "I seem to know the name. I believe—oh yes"—with the sudden indifference of one who recalls a trivial

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and long-finished incident—" I know. She was the swell who froze on to him once. I heard him mention her once or twice. Liked to feel he was good enough for society folk, you know. But he got rid of her after a couple of weeks or so. Too damned stuck up, he used to say. It wasn't one of his important affairs, not by any means—— Good Lord ! Alfred, she's fainted ! "

The tight boots of Alexander Bostock's only widow tapped nervously across the marble paving of the hall. On the floor of her boudoir the mother of one of Alexander Bostock's many mistresses—and not one of his important ones, not by any means—lay dying.

## THE OLD GENTLEMAN

### II

MR. WITHERSHAW, his letter sealed and addressed, paid for his coffee-cognac and strolled comfortably across the square to the post-office. He was waiting at the registration counter for his official receipt, when the swing-door wheezed open and snapped to behind one of those young women that only France and Vienna can produce. Technically she was not beautiful, but by allurements of clothing and by discreet but deliberate suggestion of bodily grace, she drew the eye of every man in the hot, sleepy post-office of St. Hilaire. Even the jaded clerks in their blue, linen coats threw glances of weary interest toward the new-comer, and Mr. Withershaw, despite his years, paid the usual tribute of male servility to the suzerainty of sex. His meed of respectful admiration was rendered the more easily in that the girl, who held a letter packet in her hand, came to the very *guichet* at which he stood. When she was at his side, Mr. Withershaw noticed that round her neck hung a cameo on a fine gold chain. To his surprise, he recognised that cameo. The next instant he

revised his mental language and recalled its exact fellow, for an adornment that had been the pride of his sister-in-law (and she for some years already in her grave) could hardly be the same as one now worn by a young woman of easy manners in a French gambling town. Such, at least, was his instinctive feeling. But once more, and as rapidly, was he constrained to adjust his theorising, when he observed a slight flaw on the upper edge of the ornament and the singular delicacy of the whole, both in colour and workmanship. "Very curious!" he thought. "I must look into this." And deferring for the time being more detailed effort of memory, he turned an accomplished mind to the problem of picking acquaintance with the wearer of the cameo. It was not difficult. Postal *guichets* are small and fragments of paper awkward to pick up. As Mr. Withershaw fumbled for his receipt, the young woman thrust her letter to the registration clerk. A touch of hands, a smiling apology, a trivial reference to post-office convenience—and a few minutes later the two were leaving the building in easy and amicable conversation.

Mr. Withershaw, though aged, was no fool, and the girl, though young, no greenhorn. He was unafraid that his new acquaintance would stickle for the proprieties; she knew a rich Englishman when she saw one. The while her ready brain explored each avenue of possibility that led away from an encounter so opportune with a distinguished and wealthy foreigner, the memory of Mr. Withershaw was foraging the past for facts relative to the history of the cameo. His sister-

in-law had inherited the ornament from her grandmother, for whom it had been specially designed and made at the order of an exalted personage at the court of the first Napoleon. At the death of its second owner, the cameo had passed to her favourite nephew, Jack Dane-Vereker, brother of the present Earl of Shrivenham. He, poor fellow, fell in the Boer War. His widow—he had married a girl off the stage—Mr. Withershaw had seen but once. He remembered her as an elegant, pleasant-mannered little thing, not the ordinary chorus-girl at all, but a lady a decade in advance of the unconventionality of her time. What had become of her, he had no idea. Surely the cameo would have been given her by Dane-Vereker; surely also she would have treasured it? There could be no question of sale at the bidding of poverty. The Dane-Vereker family was very rich. And so Mr. Withershaw arrived at the conclusion to which, in effect, he had jumped, the moment that he felt first convinced of the identity of this unique ornament. He decided that the cameo had been stolen.

On the surface of his rapid thinking, as on that of his new and charming acquaintance, buzzed unceasingly the flies of casual conversation. The weather, the charms of St. Hilaire, the diversions of the Casino—all the small talk of fashionable holiday traced intricate patterns over the hidden depths of their respective calculations. By now the pair were back again on the terrace of the Régence and comfortably seated. Mr. Withershaw ordered

drinks. Cigarettes were lighted. Both parties began seriously to play for position.

After a while :

" Mademoiselle is alone in St. Hilaire ? " queried Mr. Withershaw.

" And monsieur ? " parried the girl.

Mr. Withershaw sighed.

" Alas ! " he said. " Two solitaires ! "

She smiled pleasantly.

" Monsieur laments the past."

With an amused glance Mr. Withershaw spread apologetic hands.

" You are too kind ! I am an old man and my life is over. I have no right to look for more than passing courtesy from beauty and from youth."

She shot him a look of intimate respect.

" Men are never old," she murmured. " They are sometimes a little cruel, wherefore we poor women can value wisdom and experience—and gentleness."

He bowed.

" Already youth is born again with me ! But I am a bird of passage—here to-day, gone to-morrow."

" Between to-day and to-morrow are the hours of——"

He laughed.

" That of course ; but at my age one sleeps easier alone."

" I am not difficult," she replied.

" That is a beautiful cameo you are wearing." The change of subject was purposely abrupt.

She fingered the ornament absently.

## THE OLD GENTLEMAN

"Yes, it is unusual. It was given me by a rich English lady—years ago—when I was her maid in London."

"You were a lady's maid? An exquisite one, I am sure, but a little unsettling for your mistress's husband. As for 'years ago,' mademoiselle exaggerates. One is not a lady's maid in short frocks."

"It seems so long ago!" she answered. "I have been unlucky. After my English mistress died I returned to Paris. I was eighteen or nineteen then, and life was without secret for me. So it fell that I invited misfortune—and misfortune came."

"Tell me," urged Mr. Withershaw.

The young woman looked him reflectively in the eyes. She saw a very genial and benevolent old gentleman awaiting with interest the beginning of her story. That he was thinking of women he had known who lied as cleverly as she, that he was wondering whether her tale would do credit or otherwise to her capacity for invention, she was unaware. Perhaps she did not greatly mind. This was a business interview, and in salesmanship the art of selling-talk is worth cultivation for its own sake. Wherefore she considered a suitable opening for her narrative, and preferred the philosophic to the colloquial method.



## THE LADY'S MAID'S TALE ♣

# LA CHAMBRE DES MILLE PAONS

By NORMAN DAVEY

**C**OMMENT *c'est drôle*, the things that arrive. There is no end to them. Each one is unlike the other. When one is young—very young—one thinks all sorts of things. It is then that one imagines oneself to be very clever: that one makes up rules: that one says, "this is so and therefore that will be so": that one is quite sure of what is going to happen. When one is young one may be happy—one may be unhappy—but always one is certain and always one is a fool.

Do you ever dream those long dreams all through the night, as it seems when you wake, in which a thousand different things happen to you, without any order or any reason in them? The kind of dream in which you begin by sitting in front of a café at a small table of iron, drinking a *Del oso* with a friend, and then, suddenly, the table has grown as big as a dinner-table and you are sitting on it, afloat in the middle of the sea. And it is

no longer Pierre who is with you, but *Landru*, and you are *en pyjamas*. But it is not a bit cold on this sea, which is so full of seaweed that the water is thick and brown with it. And all the time Landru is explaining to you how it was necessary and quite right to kill all his wives. You know it is Landru, although he has no beard and is quite a young man, and you feel very sorry for him and friendly, and when he begins bending down and pulling up the seaweed, which he says is good to eat, you are happy to eat it with him. But while your hands are full of the wet, brown seaweed, and before you can eat any of it, the floating table and the young Landru and the sea have vanished, and the seaweed in your hand is no longer seaweed, but pink insertion which Madame has given you to sew into the *smoking* of Monsieur. You are seated on a chair in the Bois and still *en pyjamas*, but no one notices that ; until a gendarme comes up and lifts his cap and says, very politely : " Pardon, mademoiselle, but the Duc de Vichânes presents his compliments to you and would be glad of the return of his pyjamas " . . . and then you are in a taxi and the Duc is really a little dog on the seat opposite. . . .

Life is very much a dream of this kind. There is no sort of connection between this thing and the next thing. You never know what will happen or why this has happened. There are no rules.

When one is young one asks " Why ? " One thinks there is a reason, a system in this life-dream. One is not content simply to watch and to be amused. For many years now I have

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watched things happen. It is like sitting in the *fauteuils* of a great theatre. A theatre with a stage that may be large or small and with many actors or with few : with an ever-changing *décor* ; with an unending series of unconnected scenes. At first one tries to guess what will happen in the next scene. . . . Afterwards, one simply watches.

That is the *métier*—the particular *métier*—of a lady's maid. She is inside, and yet not a part of, so many houses. She is, as it were, on the stage and in the stalls at one and the same time. She is the privileged spectator : she is *l'habilleuse* : she sees the artists *sans maquillage*.

There is nothing that is hid from her, and yet . . . When I was young, very young—*ma foi*, I am not old now !—I thought I knew. I was proud of knowing so much. All the makeshifts—all the lies and excuses of the *bourgeoisie*. How mean are the rich : how *chétif*, the poor : how stupid, the virtuous : how cruel, the stupid : how *polisson*, the clever. In this *métier* one is always *espion dans la maison* : one sees everything ; hears everything—and says nothing. In those days I had pride in myself ; pride in knowing so much. I knew my way about : I was not to be deceived. I understood men and women in the world. I knew what women wanted : what men wanted ; and how they tried to get what they each desired. I knew my life : on me, as you say, there were no flies. I looked around me, *à la maison, au café, dans les rues*, and I said every day to myself, '*Je sais tout.*'

Ah ! in those days I was young : *j'étais bête*.

Now I know better ; and I say to-day, *on ne sait rien. Vraiment !* Of life, *tout à fait rien.*

Of those days (two—five—ten years ago ? It seems so long) I will tell you this story—*une petite histoire drôle.* Then : when I thought I was free from flies, and they were yet thick on me *comme sur la viande pourrie.* You know Paris ? Yes ? Then do you know Picât—*la maison Picât ?* No ? Well, there are many who live in Paris and yet have never heard of Picât. Picât is a restaurant of a very special kind. It is the first of its kind ; but it is not its *cuisine* which makes it famous ; no, nor yet its *caves.* You will eat a better *filet de sole chez Marigny, huitres chez Prunier, soufflé chez Foyot,* and at Paillard or Larue or the Café de Paris you can drink whatever wine or *fine* you care to pay for. Picât has only champagne on his list.

But Picât keeps his *clientèle* by other means. He has the finest *salons particuliers* in Paris : that is the speciality of his house.

In those days I was *femme de chambre* at the Villepiques'. They had a flat in the Avenue d'Eylau.

They were a young couple, and had been married about four years when I came to town. They seemed still very fond of each other—but they had no children—and, one never knows. Monsieur was some years older than Madame, he being thirty and she only twenty-four. The flat was large and very well furnished, for although Monsieur made but little out of his books, he was also *rentier*, and Madame's father had been Emil Stolze, a big

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man on the Bourse and *millionaire*. Did I say that Villepique was *un homme de lettres*? He was André Villepique, author of *Entretenu* and *Vierge malgré elle*. You have heard of him? No? He was not well known. His books, bound in blue leather, were in the library; but I could never read them: *ils m'ennuyaient*. When you can see so much around one every day it is a folly to read books about it.

I had not been in the house many days before I learnt that Madame's relations thought she had thrown herself away upon André Villepique. That is not surprising: I thought so myself. I did not like Monsieur: a tall lamp-post of a man, with big eyes and a great idea of how clever he was. He used to look through me as if I were made of glass. I might have been furniture for all the notice he took of me. Although he was Parisian, an Englishman (I beg Monsieur's pardon) could not have been more *gauche*. And Madame was not only rich, but she was very lovely. It was always a delight to me to dress her: she paid for the trouble you took, and she had the most lovely hair imaginable. It was very long and thick and silken, and the time which she spent on it with the brush, and the care in dressing it afterwards, was not wasted. The hair of some mistresses I have been with! Good enough in shaded lamp-light, perhaps, after an hour spent upon it; but, *mon Dieu*, in bright light before the mirror! Short, so that it has to be wound over the pad: stiff like wire: coming away with the comb: black at the roots, where the *peroxide* has not got

at it. . . . Madame's hair was not of that sort, but natural gold. *Et quelle taille!* and a skin like velvet. *Et sa figure*, with her two large blue eyes, so that the men turned round to look at her in the street. Ah, Madame could have had her pick. But she must go and marry Villepique! Bah!

She loved monsieur as far as I could see. For six months I was in the house and never a sign of a lover; though, to be sure, that was not the fault of the men. Monsieur le Comte d'Esnault-Lébine alone gave me a hundred francs a week to do what I could. . . . When Madame's relations came once a fortnight to dinner and quarrelled with Monsieur, Madame always took his part. *Mais, on ne sait jamais.*

I have told you about *la maison Picât*. It is not that I have been to such a place—*avec un Monsieur . . . au salon . . . mais non, je ne suis pas fille, moi . . .* no, but Auguste is a waiter *chez Picât*, and he was a great friend of mine. *Il était un bon type, et il m'adorait—follement.* He showed me all the rooms at Picât: that is how I know all about it. They are very beautiful; there are no others like them in Paris, for each *salon* is decorated in a different way—to suit each kind of taste.

There is *le salon du printemps*, in which the walls are painted to look like green trees and the carpet is green like grass and sprinkled with little white flowers; and the divan is piled high with green and yellow cushions, *comme les glâteuls dans la laîche au bord de la rivière*. It is the room of the spring, and the ceiling is of the palest blue as if it

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were the sky, and the *salon* is lighted by an army of tiny electric lamps hidden behind the four walls under the ceiling ; for a narrow space, only a *centimetre* wide, is left around the walls at the top, so that the light from all these lamps is reflected on to the blue ceiling, and it is as if one was dining *en plein air*. The small square table in the middle of the room is of plain deal wood, painted white, with a shallow green china bowl in the centre, streaked with brown ; and upon the water in the bowl floats a great white *nénuphar* (*comment dites-vous ?*—lily of the water ?) asleep above its green leaves. If it is cold weather, the room is warmed with a log upon the brick hearth, under a black *marmite*, and always the air is heavy with the scent of the *muguet*. If, by any chance, Mademoiselle is very young—*particulièrement, si elle a les cheveux roux, c'est ici que les choses se passent*—it is here where one dines. It is all arranged in the same manner—*partout, même dans la toilette, au coin, derrière le rideau de vert olive, il y a les carreaux de malachite, le bidet en jade*. . . . Then there is the *salon blanc*, which is all white, with a carpet in black and white squares, like a chess-board, and a round table of alabaster. . . . And the *salon noir*, in which everything is black, except the *table dorée* and the cushions in cloth of gold, and the lamp, a great globe *de nacre*, which hangs from the middle of the black ceiling. And there is a red room. . . .

But the most beautiful of all, and the one for which Picât is most famous, is the *chambre des mille paons*.

Here are painted on the walls a thousand peacocks. It is said that Picât engaged *un japonais* to do the work—one of the greatest painters in the world. The ceiling is of gold, with here and there great peacock's eyes of purple and crimson and blue and green, staring down upon you. The carpet is of gold and purple, and the great *divan* which fills one end of the room is covered with blue silk, like the sea of the *côte d'azur*, and the big cushions are sewn all over with real peacock's feathers. Four balls of crystal, covered with the wings of butterflies, hang from the ceiling by chains of gold, and fill the room with the softest light, staining with a dozen different colours the glass, set upon the table of lapis lazuli. . . . *Ah, elle est épatante, la chambre des mille paons*, and it is Auguste who is waiter in it.

He is a good fellow, is Auguste, as I have told you, and he is very proud of the room of the peacocks: his room: that is natural. He is pleased when a client, too, takes an interest in the *décor*—who is *artiste*—who is *sérieux*. . . .

It was my afternoon out, and I was sitting with Auguste outside the Café Morins. I had been with Madame Villepique about six months. Auguste sipped at his *Vermout cassis* and talked.

I didn't pay much attention to what he was saying. There is always so much to see in the street—*les messieurs qui suivent les filles*: *les coups d'œil*: the little comedies of the street: the frocks: the hats—and men always talk a lot about nothing . . . one does not listen. But suddenly I heard a name. . . .



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"Villepique."

"Comment ? Villepique ?"

"But yes. As I was saying, a Monsieur Villepique—*exigeant* ! He must see all the rooms—*le printemps, le blanc, le noir—tous*. But he would have nothing but the peacock ; he has taste, this Villepique, I admit ; and if Made-moiselle is a *blonde*, nothing could be more suitable. There are those who prefer the black room, but they are *barbares*, these. There is only the room of the peacocks for your true *blonde*. Made-moiselle Yvonne *elle-même*. . . ."

"But this Villepique ?"

"*Exigeant*, I tell you. He has reserved the room for the 15th : that is Saturday. He must have this and he must have that. The cushions must be changed. He is sending a great rug of black fur and *un parfum de luxe*, and he will not drink the *Piper*, but the *patron* must get some *Yquem* from Gaufroy. But yet I like a client who . . ."

"Why, it is *chez Villepique* where I am. . . ."

"Comment ?"

"He is tall and dark, with a moustache. . . ."

"*Parfaitement*."

"My friend, we should touch some money out of this."

"And how ? If Monsieur wishes . . . *le patron* is . . ."

"*Tais-toi, donc* : let me think."

I walked back to the house as if I was in a dream. I saw nothing in the streets. I was thinking out a plan. Life is dear and one must live somehow ; and if one can make a little money—honestly—

one should not let the chance slip away : for I am a good girl : *je ne suis pas gamine, comme les autres.*

That evening I heard Monsieur say to Madame : " On Saturday I am dining with *M. le député Duprez*. We have a lot of business to talk about, so I shall not be home until late. So don't wait up for me." And Madame said that in that case she would spend the evening at her mother's. To make it thus easy for *le vaurien, son mari !* I could have shaken her : *la petite innocente*. But I smiled to myself all the same, for I saw clearly that this would make it easier, also, for me : and I had a plan. It was not yet complete, but I thought I saw my way to gain a little money—and to punish the husband, *le sale type*. But I was young in those days, and I thought I knew everything.

Thursday was my evening out, but Madame said that as both she and Monsieur would be out on Saturday evening, would I mind changing my day to Saturday ? But, certainly, I would not mind doing that : it fitted in admirably with my plan. " Could I go a little earlier on Saturday, in that case ? " I asked Madame. " Say at three o'clock ? " It was not really necessary, this : but as I was amiable enough to change my day for Madame's convenience, it was only just that I should gain something out of it, too. One should always live up to one's principles. Also, it would afford me an opportunity to see Auguste during the afternoon and arrange details.

I had thought over this affair for nearly a week. I was quite sure now in my mind how to manage it. But it had not been easy. First, I had thought

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of going to Monsieur and threatening to tell everything I knew unless he gave me money. I did not like Villepique, but I did not consider him altogether a fool. If I threatened to expose him, before the date of the *rendezvous*, he could always alter it ; and what evidence had I of any value ?—for the word of a *femme de chambre* is worth nothing. On the other hand, if I waited until after the *rendezvous*, I still had no evidence but my word for it : Auguste and Picât would, of course, swear that Monsieur was never there ; they are discreet ; it is their *métier* to be that. It was clearly useless to go to Madame. If she disbelieved me, I would lose my place : if she believed me, I was hardly likely to be better off. No : I would go to Madame's brother . . . *C'était une bonne idée, ça*. Joseph Stolze lived in a large flat in the *rue de Courcelles*. He was not married. It is always better in the affair of this sort to deal with a man alone—*célibataire : certes, il y avait sa maîtresse ; mais, ça ne ferait rien*.

I knew my Joseph Stolze ; he, above all the family, had been against his sister marrying André Villepique. Joseph could hardly speak civilly to André when he met him in the street. If anyone would be happy to pay me for my knowledge it was Joseph Stolze—*quoiqu'il fût juif*.

It is very convenient, the telephone. On Saturday I rang up Monsieur Joseph Stolze. I made it clear to him that it was a matter of importance to him to be at home at nine o'clock, when I would call upon him ; but I did not say who I was. Then I rang up Auguste to tell

him to meet me at the Café Morins at four o'clock.

I had more trouble with Auguste than I expected. His honour was involved in the affair: clients had always trusted to his discretion: there was M. Picât, and so on. But I persuaded him at last. I explained how he ran no risk in the affair himself. He only had to leave the door of the peacock room unlocked—and not to be there when we went in. I also showed him there was money: he could expect at least ten louis: and then, as I have said, *il était fou de moi*.

M. Joseph received me in the *salle à manger*. He was surprised to see that it was only me; but I went to the point at once.

"M. Villepique," I said, "is, at this moment, dining *en cabinet particulier avec une grue*, whilst Madame believes him to be *chez M. le député Duprez*."

"— *de Dieu!* "

"*Monsieur!* "

"*Sans blague?* "

"I am not a liar. We can go there and prove it."

"Where?"

"Monsieur will understand that I have been very faithful to Madame in this matter. It has not been an easy affair. *J' n' suis pas mercenaire, moi, mais*. . . Also, there is Auguste, the waiter *aux salons*. *Il était bien exigeant*. I had to promise him five hundred francs."

"They are there now?"

"*Oui, Monsieur.*"

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"*Eh bien*, and how much do you want for yourself?"

"I leave that to Monsieur's generosity," I said modestly.

"A thousand francs . . ."

"Fifteen hundred francs, *en tout*."

M. Joseph made a face.

"You are quite sure of your facts?"

"Monsieur need not pay me until he has seen the facts for himself."

"Good! Where is it?"

"*Chez Picât*."

"*Allons-y*."

The entrance to the *salons particuliers* at Picât is not through the restaurant downstairs. There are two private entrances—one in the rue Lépici and the other in the Boulevard, so that Monsieur and Madame may, if need be, leave by different doors. We entered by the rue Lépici: Auguste met us at the top of the stairs: he vanished through a side-door after a few whispered words with me. M. Joseph followed me down the corridor.

"This is the room," I said in a low voice to Monsieur; "it is not locked. Shall I knock?"

"*Ma foi, non!*" muttered Joseph Stolze. "We will give our dear André a little surprise."

He turned the handle softly and opened the door suddenly. I followed closely behind him, and in a moment we were in the peacock room.

The first thing I saw from behind Monsieur's back was the table. It was littered with fruit dishes and coffee cups and liqueur glasses: a cigarette-end smouldered in a silver *cendrier*: the

dregs of coffee lay in the cups : one glass was still half full of *fine* : the skin and stones of peaches lay in the plates. The two chairs had been pushed back from the table and they were empty. So much I saw, when Joseph Stolze stepped forward with a stifled cry and I saw the other part of the room.

There was no sign of André Villepique, but from among the pile of cushions on the *divan* had sprung up a slender figure. She looked more than ever lovely as she stood there framed against the dark rich colours of the *divan*. Her long fair hair hung loose over her shoulders. She was dressed only *en chemise* and with one stocking on : the other lay among the cushions. Although I had dressed her every day for many months, I had never seen Madame Villepique look more beautiful as she stood there before us, the frail piece of black silk half slipping off the only shoulder on which it hung, and her white skin gleaming against the blue and black of the *décor*. But I was too amazed to enjoy, at that moment, her beauty : I could only stare at her, speechless with surprise. " Marcelle, what are you doing here ? " cried Joseph Stolze, in a terrible voice. And then he swung round on me. " You have lied to me ! "

I could only babble : " But it was Monsieur who arranged this : it was Monsieur whom Auguste saw. "

" You saw him ? "

" No ; but he gave the name, and Auguste . . . "

And then I saw it all in one flash. Madame's lover had given the name of her husband to make

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it more safe . . . in case of any indiscretion . . . any scandal. How many men are tall and dark and carry the moustache? Oh, I had been a fool! And where was my fifteen hundred francs now? I had done for myself. I could have cried—there, in front of Madame and Monsieur Joseph.

“What—why, why are you . . . Joseph, I have been dining with André,” stammered Madame.

“I see,” sneered Monsieur, “*en chemise*: charming, to be sure. Who is your lover? Where is he?”

“*Que tu es bête!*” cried Madame, stamping with her bare foot on the carpet. “I tell you it is André.”

Joseph Stolze began to laugh: it was not a pleasant laugh. It was the kind of laugh for which people have died before they had time to finish it. It was a laugh that ran up his face in successive spasms from his double chin to his bald head with the fine black hair streaks across it: a laugh that arched his eyebrows—that made to bristle the upturned points of his moustache—a laugh in which his hands and his shoulders took part. It was a devil of a laugh; it was to have been a long laugh. But he never finished that laugh. For half-way through it, the purple curtains at the far end of the room opened and through them came André Villepique. He was in his shirt and trousers, and he held a scent spray in one hand and a hair brush in the other. He stared stupidly at the scene before him. *Mon Dieu*, but it must have seemed strange enough to him. Madame, her

face flushed in anger, half in and half out of her *chemise*: Stolze, with his unfinished laugh frozen into a smile, as it were, half-way up his face: myself, with open mouth, gaping at him.

"André!" gasped Monsieur Joseph, at last, in a dry cackle of a voice.

"I told you it was André. You always were a fool, Joseph."

"But why—what—why . . ." gabbled Stolze.

"*Qu'est-ce que tu fais ici? Grosse bête! Va-t'en! Va-t'en!*"

"Why? Why?" repeated Monsieur Joseph. "I do not understand, I . . ."

"If my husband wishes to ask me out to dinner . . ." began Madame.

But André Villepique broke in.

"It is a simple matter. What kills marriage is that there is no romance, no secrecy—nothing to hide. If I care to make a *rendezvous* with my wife, as though she were not my wife . . . and dine *en cabinet* . . ."

"But haven't you got a bedroom in your house?" began Joseph Stolze, in a bewildered voice.

"Bah! Cannot you see, the psychology? The romance? At home it is the rule, like—like the *petit déjeuner*. . ."

Joseph Stolze threw himself down on the *divan* and shook with laughter, while Monsieur and Madame glared at him. At last he pulled himself together.

"*Allons, ma p'tite,*" he cried, jumping up. "*Nous laisserons les deux adultères ensemble!*"

But I did not laugh, and outside the door—



## THE LADY'S MAID'S TALE

"There is yet," I said, "the five hundred francs for Auguste."

"I do not give something for nothing," said Joseph Stolze.

Ah! in those days I was young.

I thought I knew everything. I should have insisted on having the money first.

To-day, I would know better.

To-day, I say to myself every morning and every evening: "*P'tite, tu es innocente : tu es novice, même : et maintenant encore, tu ne sais rien !*"

"Poor child!" said Mr. Withershaw, when the story was over. "You had bad luck indeed. And so you came from Paris and a disgusted Auguste to try your chance at St. Hilaire among old fools like me? Well, you shall have a reward for your pretty tale. We will go to the casino and play a little. Here are the 'five hundred francs for Auguste.' Let us see if you can make a thousand of them."

She took the money indifferently, with a formal word of thanks. From the Régence, the oddly matched pair walked down the broad street that led to the gambling-rooms.

## END OF PART II

PART III

THE COMMISSARY OF  
POLICE



## *PART III.—THE COMMISSARY OF POLICE*

### *I*

**I**T was very hot in the office of the Commissary of Police for the town and district of St. Hilaire. M. Lesueur sat in his shirt-sleeves at an untidy desk and sought a moment of relief in a cigarette and the evening paper. The sunshine of late afternoon blazed on the white houses opposite his window. The duties of Commissary in a place like St. Hilaire are arduous, and it is particularly unfortunate that, during the summer weather, when most men have their greatest leisure, those responsible for the good behaviour of a mixed and ever-changing population should be compelled most diligently to follow their profession.

“Ghostly manifestations,” read M. Lesueur. “The Château de la Hourmerie reputed spectre-ridden.” The unpretentious paragraph, thus headlined, held immediately the attention of the police officer. Carefully he perused the dozen lines of small, smudged type.

“For long enough the reputation of the Château de la Hourmerie has been unenviable, but not until

now has its sinister character been attributed to supernatural causes. During the last day or two strange noises—cries, knockings, and mysterious clatter—have been heard by persons ranging the borders of the estate. The peasantry will not enter the grounds of the château, which, although not in the market, has never been regularly tenanted, and it is improbable that even now news of the curious manifestations above referred to would have been made public, had not Jacques Tournebroche, a woodman, when under the influence of wine, spoken of his experience in passing that portion of the park wall nearest to the château itself. His recital took place in a local café, and he was overheard by a representative of the ——. Surely the local police, whose intelligence is so highly praised by official bumble-dom, should before now have investigated the causes of the isolation and suspect character of the fine property and château of la Hourmerie ? ”

M. Lesueur laid down the paper and rang a bell at his side. The uniformed gendarme that appeared in answer to the summons stood at silent attention.

“Fetch me,” said the Commissary, “the envelope and papers from Montillan, sent in by Toussaint this morning. Also his report. Also the translations, that should now be ready.”

In a few minutes he was laying out on the desk a number of documents, of which the majority were dirty and damp-stained. Among them, however, several sheets of cleaner, more official

pape. shone coldly prominent, and one of these the Commissary proceeded first to read.

"The enclosed documents were picked up by one of my men at the cross-roads where, from the main road from St. Hilaire to Montillan, strikes off the lane leading to the Château de la Hourmerie and to the village of the same name. As I am unable to trace any connection between these papers and information in the records at this sub-office, I forward them for the consideration of higher authority.

"(Signed) TOUSSAINT."

M. Lesueur then turned to the more bulky and the dingier items in the dossier. They consisted of three rough bundles of soft, irregularly torn paper, dimly patterned on one side, pencil written on the other, and so stained with damp as only with difficulty to be decipherable. Attached to each was a neat French translation, for the text scribbled on the sheets of paper was in English, and M. Lesueur had not sufficient knowledge of that language to rely on his own reading of the faint manuscript originals. Glancing at the translated versions, he found, to his dismay, that the untidy bundles of manuscript were only short stories. This, indeed, he had suspected when first examining them, but had distrusted his knowledge of English and his capacity for deciphering the foreign script. It was possible that they might turn out more interesting. Full of hope, he had ordered their complete rendering

## THE NEW DECAMERON ♀

into French, only to find confirmed his original belief.

Disappointed and a little out of temper, he forced himself none the less to read through the tales, which, written apparently on pieces of wall-paper, had been picked up in the long grass of a country lane and submitted to his expert judgment. The first was headed THE POET'S TALE and entitled WINTRY PEACOCK. It read as follows :

## THE POET'S TALE ♣

### WINTRY PEACOCK

By D. H. LAWRENCE

THERE was thin, crisp snow on the ground, the sky was blue, the wind very cold, the air clear. Farmers were just turning out the cows for an hour or so in the mid-day, and the smell of cow-sheds was unendurable as I entered Tible. I noticed the ash-twigs up in the sky were pale and luminous, passing into the blue. And then I saw the peacocks. There they were in the road before me, three of them, and tailless, brown, speckled birds, with dark-blue necks and ragged crests. They stepped archly over the filigree snow, and their bodies moved with slow motion, like small, light, flat-bottomed boats. I admired them, they were curious. Then a gust of wind caught them, heeled them over as if they were three frail boats, opening their feathers like ragged sails. They hopped and skipped with discomfort, to get out of the draught of the wind. And then, in the lee of the walls, they resumed their arch, wintry motion, light and unballasted now their tails were gone, indifferent. They were indifferent to my presence. I might



## THE POET'S TALE

have touched them. They turned off to the shelter of an open shed.

As I passed the end of the upper house, I saw a young woman just coming out of the back door. I had spoken to her in the summer. She recognised me at once, and waved to me. She was carrying a pail, wearing a white apron that was longer than her preposterously short skirt, and she had on the cotton bonnet. I took off my hat to her and was going on. But she put down her pail and darted with a swift, furtive movement after me.

"Do you mind waiting a minute?" she said. "I'll be out in a minute."

She gave me a slight, odd smile, and ran back. Her face was long and sallow and her nose rather red. But her gloomy black eyes softened caressively to me for a moment, with that momentary humility which makes a man lord of the earth.

I stood in the road, looking at the fluffy, dark-red young cattle that mooed and seemed to bark at me. They seemed happy, frisky cattle, a little impudent, and either determined to go back into the warm shed, or determined not to go back. I could not decide which.

Presently the woman came forward again, her head rather ducked. But she looked up at me and smiled, with that odd, immediate intimacy, something witch-like and impossible.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," she said. "Shall we stand in this cart-shed—it will be more out of the wind."

So we stood among the shafts of the open cart-

shed, that faced the road. Then she looked down at the ground, a little sideways, and I noticed a small black frown on her brows. She seemed to brood for a moment. Then she looked straight into my eyes, so that I blinked and wanted to turn my face aside. She was searching me for something and her look was too near. The frown was still on her keen, fallow brow.

"Can you speak French?" she asked me abruptly.

"More or less," I replied.

"I was supposed to learn it at school," she said. "But I don't know a word." She ducked her head and laughed, with a slightly ugly grimace and a rolling of her black eyes.

"No good keeping your mind full of scraps," I answered.

But she had turned aside her fallow, long face, and did not hear what I said. Suddenly again she looked at me. She was searching. And at the same time she smiled at me, and her eyes looked softly, darkly, with infinite trustful humility into mine. I was being cajoled.

"Would you mind reading a letter for me, in French?" she said, her face immediately black and bitter-looking. She glanced at me, frowning.

"Not at all," I said.

"It's a letter to my husband," she said, still scrutinising.

I looked at her, and didn't quite realise. She looked too far into me, my wits were gone. She glanced round. Then she looked at me shrewdly. She drew a letter from her pocket, and handed it

## THE POET'S TALE

to me. It was addressed from France to M. Alfred Goyte, at Tible. I took out the letter and began to read it, as mere words. "Mon cher Alfred"—it might have been a bit of a torn newspaper. So I followed the script: the trite phrases of a letter from a French-speaking girl to an Englishman. "I think of you always, always. Do you think sometimes of me?" And then I vaguely realised that I was reading a man's private correspondence. And yet, how could one consider these trivial, facile French phrases private? Nothing more trite and vulgar in the world than such a love-letter—no newspaper more obvious.

Therefore I read with a callous heart the effusions of the Belgian damsel. But then I gathered my attention. For the letter went on, "Notre cher petit bébé—our dear little baby was born a week ago. Almost I died, knowing you were far away, and perhaps forgetting the fruit of our perfect love. But the child comforted me. He has the smiling eyes and virile air of his English father. I pray to the Mother of Jesus to send me the dear father of my child, that I may see him with my child in his arms, and that we may be united in holy family love. Ah, my Alfred, can I tell you how I miss you, how I weep for you? My thoughts are with you always, I think of nothing but you, I live for nothing but you and our dear baby. If you do not come back to me soon, I shall die, and our child will die. But no, you cannot come back to me. But I can come to you. I can come to England with our child. If you do not wish

to present me to your good mother and father you can meet me in some town, some city, for I shall be so frightened to be alone in England with my child, and no one to take care of us. Yet I must come to you, I must bring my child, my little Alfred, to his father, the big, beautiful Alfred that I love so much. Oh, write and tell me where I shall come. I have some money. I am not a penniless creature. I have money for myself and my dear baby——”

I read to the end. It was signed: “Your very happy and still more unhappy Elise.” I suppose I must have been smiling.

“I can see it makes you laugh,” said Mrs. Goyte, sardonically. I looked up at her.

“It’s a love-letter, I know that,” she said. “There’s too many ‘Alfreds’ in it.”

“One too many,” I said.

“Oh yes.—And what does she say—Eliza? We know her name’s Eliza, that’s another thing.” She grimaced a little, looking up at me with a mocking laugh.

“Where did you get this letter?” I said.

“Postman gave it me last week.”

“And is your husband at home?”

“I expect him home to-night. He had an accident and hurt his leg. He’s been abroad most of his time for this last four years. He’s chauffeur to a gentleman who travels about in one country and another, on some sort of business. Married? We married? Why, six years. And I tell you I’ve seen little enough of him for four of them. But he always was a rake. He went through the

## THE POET'S TALE

South African War, and stopped out there for five years. I'm living with his father and mother. I've no home of my own now. My people had a big farm—over a thousand acres—in Oxfordshire. Not like here—no. Oh, they're very good to me, his father and mother. Oh yes, they couldn't be better. They think more of me than of their own daughters.—But it's not like being in a place of your own, is it? You can't *really* do as you like. No, there's only me and his father and mother at home. Always a chauffeur? No, he's been all sorts of things: was to be a farm-bailiff by rights. He's had a good education—but he liked the motors better.—Then he was five years in the Cape Mounted Police. I met him when he came back from there, and married him—more fool me——”

At this point the peacocks came round the corner on a puff of wind.

“Hello, Joey!” she called, and one of the birds came forward, on delicate legs. Its grey speckled back was very elegant, it rolled its full, dark-blue neck as it moved to her. She crouched down. “Joey dear,” she said, in an odd, saturnine caressive voice: “you're bound to find me, aren't you?” She put her face downward, and the bird rolled his neck, almost touching her face with his beak, as if kissing her.

“He loves you,” I said.

She twisted her face up at me with a laugh.

“Yes,” she said, “he loves me, Joey does”—then, to the bird—“and I love Joey, don't I? I *do* love Joey.” And she smoothed his feathers

for a moment. Then she rose, saying: "He's an affectionate bird."

I smiled at the roll of her "bir-rrd."

"Oh yes, he is," she protested. "He came with me from my home seven years ago. Those others are his descendants—but they're not like Joey—are *they*, *dee-urr*?" Her voice rose at the end with a witch-like cry.

Then she forgot the birds in the cart-shed, and turned to business again.

"Won't you read that letter?" she said. "Read it, so that I know what it says."

"It's rather behind his back," I said.

"Oh, never mind him," she cried. "He's been behind my back long enough. If he never did no worse things behind my back than I do behind his, he wouldn't have cause to grumble. You read me what it says."

Now I felt a distinct reluctance to do as she bid, and yet I began—"My dear Alfred."

"I guessed that much," she said. "Eliza's dear Alfred." She laughed. "How do you say it in French? *Eliza*?"

I told her, and she repeated the name with great contempt—*Elise*.

"Go on," she said. "You're not reading."

So I began—"I have been thinking of you sometimes—have you been thinking of me?"

"Of several others as well, beside her, I'll wager," said Mrs. Goyte.

"Probably not," said I, and continued. "A dear little baby was born here a week ago. Ah,

## THE POET'S TALE

can I tell you my feelings when I take my darling little brother into my arms——”

“I’ll bet it’s *his*,” cried Mrs. Goyte.

“No,” I said. “It’s her mother’s.”

“Don’t you believe it,” she cried. “It’s a blind. You mark, it’s her own right enough—and his.”

“No,” I said. “It’s her mother’s. ‘He has sweet smiling eyes, but not like your beautiful English eyes——’”

She suddenly struck her hand on her skirt with a wild motion, and bent down, doubled with laughter. Then she rose and covered her face with her hand.

“I’m forced to laugh at the beautiful English eyes,” she said.

“Aren’t his eyes beautiful?” I asked.

“Oh yes—*very*! Go on!—*Joey dear, dee-urr Joey!*”—this to the peacock.

“—Er—‘We miss you very much. We all miss you. We wish you were here to see the darling baby. Ah, Alfred, how happy we were when you stayed with us. We all loved you so much. My mother will call the baby Alfred so that we shall never forget you——’”

“Of course it’s his right enough,” cried Mrs. Goyte.

“No,” I said. “It’s the mother’s. Er—‘My mother is very well. My father came home yesterday—from Lille. He is delighted with his son, my little brother, and wishes to have him named after you, because you were so good to us all in that terrible time, which I shall never forget.

I must weep now when I think of it. Well, you are far away in England, and perhaps I shall never see you again. How did you find your dear mother and father? I am so happy that your leg is better, and that you can nearly walk——”

“How did he find his dear *wife*!” cried Mrs. Goyte. “He never told her that he had one. Think of taking the poor girl in like that!”

“We are so pleased when you write to us. Yet now you are in England you will forget the family you served so well——”

“A bit too well—*eh*, *Joey*!” cried the wife.

“If it had not been for you we should not be alive now, to grieve and to rejoice in this life, that is so hard for us. But we have recovered some of our losses, and no longer feel the burden of poverty. The little Alfred is a great comforter to me. I hold him to my breast and think of the big, good Alfred, and I weep to think that those times of suffering were perhaps the times of a great happiness that is gone for ever.”

“Oh, but isn’t it a shame to take a poor girl in like that!” cried Mrs. Goyte. “Never to let on that he was married, and raise her hopes—I call it beastly, I do.”

“You don’t know,” I said. “You know how anxious women are to fall in love, wife or no wife. How could he help it, if she was determined to fall in love with him?”

“He could have helped it if he’d wanted to.”

“Well,” I said. “We aren’t all heroes.”

“Oh, but that’s different!—The big, good Alfred!—did you ever hear such Tommy-rot in



your life?—Go on—what does she say at the end?"

"Er—We shall be pleased to hear of your life in England. We all send many kind regards to your good parents. I wish you all happiness for your future days. Your very affectionate and ever-grateful Elise."

There was silence for a moment, during which Mrs. Goyte remained with her head dropped, sinister and abstracted. Suddenly she lifted her face, and her eyes flashed.

"Oh, but I call it beastly, I call it mean, to take a girl in like that."

"Nay," I said. "Probably he hasn't taken her in at all. Do you think those French girls are such poor innocent things? I guess she's a great deal more downy than he."

"Oh, he's one of the biggest fools that ever walked," she cried.

"There you are!" said I.

"But it's his child right enough," she said.

"I don't think so," said I.

"I'm sure of it."

"Oh well," I said—"if you prefer to think that way."

"What other reason has she for writing like that——?"

I went out into the road and looked at the cattle.

"Who is this driving the cows?" I said. She too came out.

"It's the boy from the next farm," she said.

"Oh well," said I, "those Belgian girls! You

never know where their letters will end.—And after all, it's his affair—you needn't bother."

"Oh——!" she cried, with rough scorn—"it's not *me* that bothers. But it's the nasty meanness of it. Me writing him such loving letters"—she put her hands before her face and laughed malevolently—"and sending him nice little cakes and bits I thought he'd fancy all the time. You bet he fed that gurrl on my things—I know he did. It's just like him.—I'll bet they laughed together over my letters. I'll bet anything they did——"

"Nay," said I. "He'd burn your letters for fear they'd give him away."

There was a black look on her yellow face. Suddenly a voice was heard calling. She poked her head out of the shed, and answered coolly:

"All right!" Then, turning to me: "That's his mother looking after me."

She laughed into my face, witch-like, and we turned down the road.

When I awoke, the morning after this episode, I found the house darkened with deep, soft snow, which had blown against the large west windows, covering them with a screen. I went outside, and saw the valley all white and ghastly below me, the trees beneath black and thin looking like wire, the rock-faces dark between the glistening shroud, and the sky above sombre, heavy, yellowish-dark, much too heavy for the world below of hollow bluey whiteness figured with black. I felt I was in a valley of the dead. And I sensed I was a prisoner, for the snow was everywhere deep,

## THE POET'S TALE 🐾

and drifted in places. So all the morning I remained indoors, looking up the drive at the shrubs so heavily plumed with snow, at the gateposts raised high with a foot or more of extra whiteness. Or I looked down into the white-and-black valley, that was utterly motionless and beyond life, a hollow sarcophagus.

Nothing stirred the whole day—no plume fell off the shrubs, the valley was as abstracted as a grove of death. I looked over at the tiny, half-buried farms away on the bare uplands beyond the valley hollow, and I thought of Tible in the snow, of the black, witch-like little Mrs. Goyte. And the snow seemed to lay me bare to influences I wanted to escape.

In the faint glow of half-clear light that came about four o'clock in the afternoon, I was roused to see a motion in the snow away below, near where the thorn-trees stood very black and dwarfed, like a little savage group, in the dismal white. I watched closely. Yes, there was a flapping and a struggle—a big bird, it must be, labouring in the snow. I wondered. Our biggest birds, in the valley, were the large hawks that often hung flickering opposite my windows, level with me, but high above some prey on the steep valley-side. This was much too big for a hawk—too big for any known bird. I searched in my mind for the largest English wild birds—geese, buzzards.

Still it laboured and strove, then was still, a dark spot, then struggled again. I went out of the house and down the steep slope, at risk of breaking my leg between the rocks. I knew the ground so

well—and yet I got well shaken before I drew near the thorn-trees.

Yes, it was a bird. It was Joey. It was the grey-brown peacock with a blue neck. He was snow-wet and spent.

“Joey—Joey de-urr!” I said, staggering unevenly towards him. He looked so pathetic, rowing and struggling in the snow, too spent to rise, his blue neck stretching out and lying sometimes on the snow, his eyes closing and opening quickly, his crest all battered.

“Joey dee-urr! Dee-urr!” I said caressingly to him. And at last he lay still, blinking, in the surged and furrowed snow, whilst I came near and touched him, stroked him, gathered him under my arm. He stretched his long, wetted neck away from me as I held him, none the less he was quiet in my arm, too tired, perhaps, to struggle. Still he held his poor, crested head away from me, and seemed sometimes to droop, to wilt, as if he might suddenly die.

He was not so heavy as I expected, yet it was a struggle to get up to the house with him again. We set him down, not too near the fire, and gently wiped him with cloths. He submitted, only now and then stretched his soft neck away from us, avoiding us helplessly. Then we set warm food by him. I put it to his beak, tried to make him eat. But he ignored it. He seemed to be ignorant of what we were doing, recoiled inside himself inexplicably. So we put him in a basket with cloths, and left him crouching oblivious. His food we put near him. The blinds were drawn,

## THE POET'S TALE

the house was warm, it was night. Sometimes he stirred, but mostly he huddled still, leaning his queer crested head on one side. He touched no food, and took no heed of sounds or movements. We talked of brandy or stimulants. But I realised we had best leave him alone.

In the night, however, we heard him thumping about. I got up anxiously with a candle. He had eaten some food, and scattered more, making a mess. And he was perched on the back of a heavy arm-chair. So I concluded he was recovered, or recovering.

The next day was clear, and the snow had frozen, so I decided to carry him back to Tible. He consented, after various flappings, to sit in a big fish-bag with his battered head peeping out with wild uneasiness. And so I set off with him, slithering down into the valley, making good progress down in the pale shadows beside the rushing waters, then climbing painfully up the arrested white valley-side, plumed with clusters of young pine-trees, into the paler white radiance of the snowy upper regions, where the wind cut fine. Joey seemed to watch all the time with wide, anxious, unseeing eyes, brilliant and inscrutable. As I drew near to Tible township, he stirred violently in the bag, though I do not know if he had recognised the place. Then, as I came to the sheds, he looked sharply from side to side, and stretched his neck out long. I was a little afraid of him. He gave a loud, vehement yell, opening his sinister beak, and I stood still, looking at him as he struggled in the bag, shaken myself

by his struggles, yet not thinking to release him.

Mrs. Goyte came darting past the end of the house, her head sticking forward in sharp scrutiny. She saw me, and came forward.

"Have you got Joey?" she cried sharply, as if I were a thief.

I opened the bag, and he flopped out, flapping as if he hated the touch of the snow, now. She gathered him up and put her lips to his beak. She was flushed and handsome, her eyes bright, her hair slack, thick, but more witch-like than ever. She did not speak.

She had been followed by a grey-haired woman with a round, rather sallow face and a slightly hostile bearing.

"Did you bring him with you, then?" she asked sharply. I answered that I had rescued him the previous evening.

From the background slowly approached a slender man with a grey moustache and large patches on his trousers.

"You've got 'im back 'gain, Ah see," he said to his daughter-in-law. His wife explained how I had found Joey.

"Ah," went on the grey man. "It wor our Alfred scarred him off, back your life. He must 'a' flyed ower t' valley. Tha ma' thank thy stars as 'e wor fun, Maggie. 'E'd a bin froze. They a bit nesh, you know," he concluded to me.

"They are," I answered. "This isn't their country."

## THE POET'S TALE

"No, it isna," replied Mr. Goyte. He spoke very slowly and deliberately, quietly, as if the soft pedal were always down in his voice. He looked at his daughter-in-law as she crouched, flushed and dark, before the peacock, which would lay its long blue neck for a moment along her lap. In spite of his grey moustache and thin grey hair, the elderly man had a face young and almost delicate, like a young man's. His blue eyes twinkled with some inscrutable source of pleasure, his skin was fine and tender, his nose delicately arched. His grey hair being slightly ruffled, he had a debonnair look, as of a youth who is in love.

"We mun tell 'im it's come," he said slowly, and turning he called :

"Alfred—Alfred ! Wheer's ter gotten to ? "

Then he turned again to the group.

"Get up, then, Maggie, lass, get up wi' thee. Tha ma'es too much o' th' bod."

A young man approached, limping, wearing a thick short coat and knee-breeches. He was Danish-looking, broad at the loins.

"I's come back, then," said the father to the son—"leastwise, he's bin browt back, flyed ower the Griff Low."

The son looked at me. He had a devil-may-care bearing, his cap on one side, his hands stuck in the front pockets of his breeches. But he said nothing.

"Shall you come in a minute, Master ? " said the elderly woman, to me.

"Ay, come in an' ha'e a cup o' tea or summat.

You'll do wi' summat, carryin' that bod. Come on, Maggie wench, let's go in."

So we went indoors, into the rather stuffy, overcrowded living-room, that was too cosy and too warm. The son followed last, standing in the doorway. The father talked to me. Maggie put out the tea-cups. The mother went into the dairy again.

"Tha'lt rouse thysen up a bit again now, Maggie," the father-in-law said—and then to me: "'Er's not bin very bright sin' Alfred come whoam, an' the bod flyed awee. 'E come whoam a Wednesday night, Alfred did. But ay, you knowed, didna yer. Ay, 'e comed 'a Wednesday—an' I reckon there wor a bit of a to-do between 'em, worn't there, Maggie?"

He twinkled maliciously to his daughter-in-law, who was flushed brilliant and handsome.

"Oh, be quiet, father. You're wound up, by the sound of you," she said to him, as if crossly. But she could never be cross with him.

"'Er's got 'er colour back this mornin'," continued the father-in-law slowly. "It's bin heavy weather wi' 'er this last two days. Ay—'er's bin north-east sin 'er seed you a Wednesday."

"Father, do stop talking. You'd wear the leg off an iron pot. I can't think where you've found your tongue, all of a sudden," said Maggie, with caressive sharpness.

"Ah've found it wheer I lost it. Aren't goin' ter come in an' sit thee down, Alfred?"

But Alfred turned and disappeared.

"'E's got th' monkey on 'is back, ower this



## THE POET'S TALE

letter job," said the father secretly to me. "Mother 'er knows nowt about it. Lot o' tomfoolery, isn't it? Ay! What's good o' makin' a peck o' trouble ower what's far enough off, an' ned niver come no nigher. No—not a smite o' use. That's what I tell 'er. 'Er should ta'e no notice on't. Ay, what can y'expect."

The mother came in again, and the talk became general. Maggie flashed her eyes at me from time to time, complacent and satisfied, moving among the men. I paid her little compliments, which she did not seem to hear. She attended to me with a kind of sinister, witch-like graciousness, her dark head ducked between her shoulders, at once humble and powerful. She was happy as a child attending to her father-in-law and to me. But there was something ominous between her eyebrows, as if a dark moth were settled there—and something ominous in her bent, hulking bearing.

She sat on a low stool by the fire, near her father-in-law. Her head was dropped, she seemed in a state of abstraction. From time to time she would suddenly recover, and look up at us, laughing and chatting. Then she would forget again. Yet in her hulked black forgetting she seemed very near to us.

The door having been opened, the peacock came slowly in, prancing calmly. He went near to her, and crouched down, coiling his blue neck. She glanced at him, but almost as if she did not observe him. The bird sat silent, seeming to sleep, and the woman also sat huddled and silent, seeming

oblivious. Then once more there was a heavy step, and Alfred entered. He looked at his wife, and he looked at the peacock crouching by her. He stood large in the doorway, his hands stuck in front of him, in his breeches pockets. Nobody spoke. He turned on his heel and went out again.

I rose also to go. Maggie started as if coming to herself.

"Must you go?" she asked, rising and coming near to me, standing in front of me, twisting her head sideways and looking up at me. "Can't you stop a bit longer? We can all be cosy to-day, there's nothing to do outdoors." And she laughed, showing her teeth oddly. She had a long chin.

I said I must go. The peacock uncoiled and coiled again his long blue neck as he lay on the hearth. Maggie still stood close in front of me, so that I was acutely aware of my waistcoat buttons.

"Oh, well," she said, "you'll come again, won't you? Do come again."

I promised.

"Come to tea one day—yes, do!"

I promised—one day.

The moment I was out of her presence I ceased utterly to exist for her—as utterly as I ceased to exist for Joey. With her curious abstractedness she forgot me again immediately. I knew it as I left her. Yet she seemed almost in physical contact with me while I was with her.

The sky was all pallid again, yellowish. When I went out there was no sun; the snow was blue

and cold. I hurried away down the hill, musing on Maggie. The road made a loop down the sharp face of the slope. As I went crunching over the laborious snow I became aware of a figure striding awkwardly down the steep scarp to intercept me. It was a man with his hands in front of him, half stuck in his breeches pockets, and his shoulders square—a real knock-about fellow. Alfred, of course. He waited for me by the stone fence.

"Excuse me," he said as I came up.

I came to a halt in front of him and looked into his sullen blue eyes. He had a certain odd haughtiness on his brows. But his blue eyes stared insolently at me.

"Do you know anything about a letter—in French—that my wife opened—a letter of mine?"

"Yes," said I. "She asked me to read it to her."

He looked square at me. He did not know exactly how to feel.

"What was there in it?" he asked.

"Why?" I said. "Don't you know?"

"She makes out she's burnt it," he said.

"Without showing it you?" I asked.

He nodded slightly. He seemed to be meditating as to what line of action he should take. He wanted to know the contents of the letter: he must know: and therefore he must ask me, for evidently his wife had taunted him. At the same time, no doubt, he would like to wreak untold vengeance on my unfortunate person. So he eyed me, and I eyed him, and neither of us spoke. He

did not want to repeat his request to me. And yet I only looked at him, and considered.

Suddenly he threw back his head and glanced down the valley. Then he changed his position and he looked at me more confidentially.

"She burnt the blasted thing before I saw it," he said.

"Well," I answered slowly, "she doesn't know herself what was in it."

He continued to watch me narrowly. I grinned to myself.

"I didn't like to read her out what there was in it," I continued.

He suddenly flushed out so that the veins in his neck stood out, and he stirred again uncomfortably.

"The Belgian girl said her baby had been born a week ago, and that they were going to call it Alfred," I told him.

He met my eyes. I was grinning. He began to grin, too.

"Good luck to her," he said.

"Best of luck," said I.

"And what did you tell *her*?" he asked.

"That the baby belonged to the old mother—that it was brother to your girl, who was writing to you as a friend of the family."

He stood smiling, with the long, subtle malice of a farmer.

"And did she take it in?" he asked.

"As much as she took anything else."

He stood grinning fixedly. Then he broke into a short laugh.

"Good for *her*!" he exclaimed cryptically.

## THE POET'S TALE

And then he laughed aloud once more, evidently feeling he had won a big move in his contest with his wife.

"What about the other woman?" I asked.

"Who?"

"Elise."

"Oh"—he shifted uneasily—"she was all right——"

"You'll be getting back to her," I said.

He looked at me. Then he made a grimace with his mouth.

"Not me," he said. "Back your life it's a plant."

"You don't think the *cher petit bébé* is a little Alfred?"

"It might be," he said.

"Only might?"

"Yes—an' there's lots of mites in a pound of cheese." He laughed boisterously but uneasily.

"What did she say, exactly?" he asked.

I began to repeat, as well as I could, the phrases of the letter:

"*Mon cher Alfred,—Figure-toi comme je suis désolée——*"

He listened with some confusion. When I had finished all I could remember, he said:

"They know how to pitch you out a letter, those Belgian lasses."

"Practice," said I.

"They get plenty," he said.

There was a pause.

"Oh well," he said. "I've never got that letter, anyhow."

The wind blew fine and keen, in the sunshine, across the snow. I blew my nose and prepared to depart.

"And *she* doesn't know anything?" he continued, jerking his head up the hill in the direction of Tible.

"She knows nothing but what I've said—that is, if she really burnt the letter."

"I believe she burnt it," he said, "for spite. She's a little devil, she is. But I shall have it out with her." His jaw was stubborn and sullen. Then suddenly he turned to me with a new note.

"Why?" he said. "Why didn't you wring that b—— peacock's neck—that b—— Joey?"

"Why?" I said. "What for?"

"I hate the brute," he said. "I let fly at him the night I got back——"

I laughed. He stood and mused.

"Poor little Elise," he murmured.

"Was she small—petite?" I asked. He jerked up his head.

"No," he said. "Rather tall."

"Taller than your wife, I suppose."

Again he looked into my eyes. And then once more he went into a loud burst of laughter that made the still, snow-deserted valley clap again.

"God, it's a knockout!" he said, thoroughly amused. Then he stood at ease, one foot out, his hands in his breeches pocket, in front of him, his head thrown back, a handsome figure of a man.

"But I'll do that blasted Joey in——" he mused.

## THE NEW DECAMERON •

I ran down the hill, shouting also with laughter.

• • • • •

M. Lesueur laid down the manuscript with a sniff of perplexity. Perhaps the second bundle would be more rewarding.

"The Priest's Tale," he read. And then its title :

PÈRE ETIENNE

# THE PRIEST'S TALE ♣

## PÈRE ETIENNE

By ROBERT KEABLE

PÈRE ETIENNE came aboard at Dar-es-Salaam and did not at once make friends. It was our own fault, however. He neither obtruded nor effaced himself, but rather went quietly on his own way with that recollection which the clerical system of the Catholic Church encourages. We few first-class passengers had already settled down into the usual regularities of shipboard life, from the morning constitutional in pyjamas on the boat deck, to the Bridge four after dinner in the smoke-room, and, besides, it was plain that Père Etienne was not likely to have much in common with any of us. So we were polite at a distance, like Englishmen everywhere. Even I, who, by virtue of my cloth, might have been supposed to make advances, was shy of beginning. I was young in those days, and for one thing spelt Rome always with a big capital.

But from the first there was something which attracted me to the priest, the more so as it was hard to define. In his appearance there was nothing



## THE PRIEST'S TALE

to suggest interest. His age was round about fifty ; his hair brown, though in his beard a white hair or two was to be observed. In his short black coat and trousers he looked neither mediæval nor a traveller, and his luggage was neither romantically minute nor interestingly large. He was booked from Dar-es-Salaam to Bombay, and the purser professed neither to know whence he came nor whither he went beyond those two fixed points.

Yet I was attracted. I have no wish to bore you, so that I shall not dwell upon the point, but in my opinion it was interesting. There are some people who carry an atmosphere with them as they go their own individual way about the world, and there are others who can instantly perceive it. I am not speaking of clairvoyance ; I dislike that jargon ; but I do know that I was conscious of Père Etienne if he did but pass the smoke-room door when I was about to play a doubled four in No Trumps.

Well, our old British India tramp lay about for a week in Dar-es-Salaam harbour, rolled up to Tanga, and finally crossed over to Zanzibar, without further developments. There we passengers went sweltering about the narrow streets, visited duly the coconut and clove plantations, and conceived ourselves to be exploring by hiring a car, crossing the island to Chuaka, and spending a day up the creek. Père Etienne went at once to the Catholic Mission and remained there. Thus it was not until the evening on which we sailed that we saw him again.

It was half an hour or so before sunset, and a

serene beauty lay over land and sea. There was the gentlest breeze, and at our moorings it was almost cool. We were clustering on the landward side of the ship, smoking and watching the town and harbour. Close up under the tall white houses the blue sea broke in tiny creamy ripples on the sand or the low coral rocks, and, with its green woods to right and left, the city seemed to dream in the sun. One could see, however, that it was preparing to wake. A flutter of orange or scarlet on the flat roofs here and there told that the women were already coming up to enjoy the cooler hours; and between the thin cassuarinas in the square that opened to the sea before the Sultan's Palace, a white-robed crowd was gathering for the faint excitement of the sunset gun. Between ship and shore, the brown-timbered rough-hewn native boats came and went on their long oars, and in smarter skiffs the silk and curio merchants were taking a lingering leave of us. From the south a dozen peaceful lateen-sailed dhows beat up for the native anchorage behind which, from our view-point, the twin spires of the Catholic cathedral stood out against an opal sky. Despite travellers' tales, there is only one mosque with a minaret in Zanzibar, and that so small and hidden that it is scarcely visible from the sea.

Watching the dhows and sighting the cathedral, suggested, I suppose, Père Etienne. Someone asked if his reverence had come aboard, but no one knew. Lazily turning the question and answer over in my mind, I became aware that I was sure he had. The persistent intuition grew

on me. Without speaking of it, I determined, out of sheer curiosity, to go and see. I detached myself from the group unobtrusively, and strolled off round the deck.

Sure enough on the seaward side I saw him. He was sitting in a deck-chair and looking out across the water. At first I thought he was gazing intently at nothing, but as I too looked, I made out, across the strait, the dim outline of the Shamballa Mountains on the mainland that are sometimes visible for a little at sunset and dawn. The priest's chair was drawn close to the bulwark, and almost before I knew what I was doing, I was leaning against it in an attitude which allowed me, too, to see those distant peaks and at the same time to converse easily, if it should be permitted.

"Hullo, father," I said; "we were wondering if you had come aboard."

He looked at me, smiling. "I believe I was one of the first," he replied, in his excellent English.

"Saying good-bye to Africa?" I queried, half jocularly.

"Yes, I expect so."

The tone of his voice suggested far more than the words themselves expressed. It aroused my curiosity. "For long?" I asked.

"Well, I don't suppose I shall see those peaks again. I saw them first twenty-seven years ago, a young priest on his first mission, and I have not seen them from the sea since. Now I have been ordered to India to my second mission, and it is not very likely that I shall be moved again. It is still less likely that I shall return. After so

long an acquaintance, it is natural that I should want to say good-bye."

I, think I was slightly incredulous. "Do you mean you have been over twenty-seven years up there without leave?" I questioned.

"Twenty-seven next month, there and beyond."

I have told you that I was young in those days, and I did not then know of the heroic sacrifices of Catholic missionaries. Moreover, I too was taking a first leave—after two years' service, according to our plan. And I was eagerly looking forward to a visit to my married sister in India, and a journey home after that. Stupidly enough, it took me a few seconds to swallow those twenty-seven years; but for all that my mind worked quickly. Twenty-seven years of tinned food, mosquitoes, heat, natives, and packing-case furniture! That was how I read it. "Well," I said at last, "I should think you were glad to go anywhere after all that time."

"Eh? Oh, I don't know. No, that's wrong; I do know. I'm sorry, that's the truth."

"You like Africa?"

The Frenchman showed himself in the half-humorous shrug of the shoulders, but the missionary spoke. "It has become my home, and its people my people," he said.

I turned the saying over in my mind before I spoke again. Then interest and attraction overcame my hesitation, and I abandoned all pretence of making a chance conversation. "Father," I said, "I expect you have travelled a good deal up

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there and seen many things. Tell me a little about it all. I've seen enough to be very interested in your experiences. May I pull up a chair and may we talk?"

His brown eyes twinkled. "Certainly," he said, "especially if you will give me a fill of that English tobacco you're smoking. Years ago I learned to smoke English tobacco, but it hasn't too often come my way."

I threw him my pouch with a laugh and went to find a chair. That was the beginning of many conversations, but none of his stories interested me more than the one he told me that night. He had half hinted of strange happenings away back there in remote districts, as well as of more commonplace although sufficiently interesting journeys and adventures, and it was to the less usual that I was drawn that evening. There was that about Père Etienne which made one feel that the commonplace world was of secondary importance, and that he, like the poet at Charing Cross, might find Jacob's ladder reaching heavenward in any place. Thus, while the light died swiftly out of the sky and the stars shone out over that far-off range which runs up to the Para Mountains and giant Kili-manjaro and that far-flung plain which lies embraced beyond, between them and the great lakes, I put my question and he answered it. "Tell me the queerest of all the queer things you have seen, father," I said.

"Queer?"

"Yes," said I. "Unusual, I mean. Not necessarily supernatural, and not horrible. But

the thing, perhaps, that more than all else draws your mind back to Africa."

"You ask a big thing," he said, smiling friendlily.

"And I believe you can answer it," said I, impulsively.

He nodded more gravely. "I believe I can," he said.

"I shall tell you a little story that seems to me singularly arresting and tender. True, I believe that it may arrest me because it occurred in a village—or perhaps I should say a town—which I have visited but once though I have often tried to get back to it again. Now I shall never go. Very likely it is for that reason, then, that it lingers in my memory as a place of great beauty, though in my opinion there are other causes. However, let me begin by describing it to you.

"From the slopes of Kilimanjaro you can look westwards to Mweru, a still active volcano little known and rarely visited, and from Mweru a chain of heights runs west once more till they end abruptly almost in a precipice that descends to the plain. At its foot rises a small river, bubbling up from half a dozen springs in a slight depression, and flowing swiftly off, very clear and cool, towards the great lake which is visible on the horizon from the mountain behind. Just below the pool of the source, on the right bank, shaded with trees, ringed with giant aloes and set in fields of millet and maize, stands a somewhat remarkable native town. There is stone in the hills, and the natives have drawn and worked it for their huts—not a

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usual thing in tropical Africa. They may, of course, have learned the lore themselves, or some wandering Arab traders may have taught them; but I have another idea, as you shall hear. Be that as it may, there the neat houses stand—grey walls, brown thatch, small swept yards of trodden earth before them within the rings of neat reed fencing. Great willows grow along the bank and trail their hanging tendrils in the water, and the brown kiddies swing from them and go splashing into the stream with shouts of delight. The place is remote, and in a corner out of the path of marauding tribes. Not too easy to find, its folk are peaceable, and I can see it again as I saw it on my first visit when, from the height of the precipice behind, I could make out the thin spires of smoke rising on the evening air and just perceive the brown herds of cattle drifting slowly homewards to the protecting kraals.

“The tribe is a branch of the Bonde, iron workers and a settled folk. How they came to be there, so far north and west of the main stock of their people, I do not know, but of course one comes across that kind of thing fairly commonly and the explanation is nearly always the same. Fear of some kind drove out a family who wandered, like Abram from Charron, until they found a promised land. These folk knew that they came from the south and east a long long time ago; more they neither knew nor cared to know. They were not many in number, and although Arab *safaris* had passed by, they were not enough to tempt a permanent trader to cross the barren lands north and

south, or dare the mountain way from Mweru. The chief's oldest councillor spoke to me of a slave-raid that had been defeated when he was a young man, but since then they had dwelt in peace. No European had been there within living memory.

"Such was, and may be still, the town of Mtakatifuni, as I shall call it. Do you know Ki-Swahili?"

I shook my head.

"Then the name will do, and not spoil my tale. Let me but tell you how I came to be there and I will make haste about it. I was exploring. Ah, but once in all the years have I been able to explore! Usually we missionaries hurry from place to place on an unending round till the circle is as big as we can possibly manage. Then a new centre must be made, and it was because my Order had determined on a new centre that my opportunity came. The Vicar Apostolic was doubtful as to the direction in which we should expand. He sent me, therefore, west beyond Mweru to see what could be seen, and another farther south on the same errand. The folk were few about Mweru, but I heard a rumour of Mtakatifuni, much exaggerated, and set out to find it. Foolishly I went west until supplies were so low that it would have been fatal to turn back over the bare mountains by which we had come, and our only hope lay in pushing on. And so I reached my hidden town, stayed a while, and returned another way, to find that the other explorer had a report to make of more peopled and easier lands which



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found greater favour with his lordship. And rightly. When labourers are so few and the field is so big, it is necessary to settle where the work offers most prospect of large returns. So was I permitted to see, but not to enter in."

He leant forward to knock out his pipe, blew down it, refused more tobacco, and re-settled himself. "Ah, well," he said philosophically, "*le Bon Dieu* knows best. I do not believe He has forgotten Mtakatifuni.

"Where was I? Oh yes, I remember. We saw the place then, in the evening, and next morning journeyed early towards it. You must understand that we were spent. I cannot recall better water than that at the source of that little river, and the roasted mealies they gave us, and sour milk, how good it all was! The chief had sent word that we were to be fed and given an empty house, and after I had eaten I went to see and thank him. I put on my cassock and with it my beads about my waist, and I carried my breviary in my hand, for I thought he might keep me waiting in the native fashion and that I could say my office in the meantime.

"But he received me at once. The ground rose a little and was built up too before his group of huts, terraced roughly and faced with stone, with steps at one end. A big block of stone stood near the edge of it, so that standing behind one looked east over the town to the mountains, and it was there, after a little, that I offered the Holy Sacrifice each remaining day of my stay. There was little linen in the place, and he stood to greet me at the

top of the steps, clad in prepared skins, a youngish man and a fine figure of a savage king. He gave me later the twisted iron spear of state that he carried that day. It hangs in our church of the Holy Cross now, behind the altar of the Sacred Heart. Surely the Good God will not forget Mitakatifuni.

"Well, he greeted me courteously, with reserve, but with a suggestion of curious eagerness. I marked it at once. Not, however, till the usual questions as to my journeys and so on were over, did I get a clue to the cause of it. But then, when we were seated on stools by the great stone I have mentioned, big clay beakers of thin, delicious light beer beside us, he put a question. 'Why have you been so long a time coming, my father?' he asked. 'A little later and you would have been too late.'

"I was slightly puzzled, but I supposed he referred to the length of my journey. 'The way was long and rough, chief,' said I.

"'But why were you so long in setting out?' he persisted. 'Mwezi has been expecting you for many years.' He turned to an old councillor. 'How many years has Mwezi been expecting the father?'

"'Since the days of the Great One, the father of the King,' said the old man. 'Mwezi came first among us when I was a boy.'

"Now most of this was Greek to me, but the speaker was fifty if he was a day, whatever allowance was to be made for the early ageing of Africans, and you may imagine that I understood enough to

## THE PRIEST'S TALE

be surprised. 'How could that be, chief?' I asked. 'When this old man was a boy, I had not crossed the black water to come to this land, and possibly I had not been born. Truly of this Mwezi I knew nothing, but how could he expect me whom even my mother had not seen?'

"The chief looked worried, and stared at me for awhile in silence. Then he nodded thoughtfully. 'It is true,' he said. 'The father is doubtless wise and has seen years, but his beard is not white and the thing is strange. Nevertheless he wears the black robe and the dried beans, and he carries the book in his hand, even as Mwezi has said. Still, I have sent for Mwezi, and doubtless he will explain the matter. See, he comes; slowly, for he is very old. Does the father not remember him at all?'

"He pointed down the path that led up to us from the town, into which had come a small crowd of natives who were eagerly following three or four figures, jostling each other to get a better view. It soon became plain that a young man led the way, and that after him came three of whom I guessed the central person to be Mwezi. I think he was the oldest native I have ever seen, bent, shrivelled, and stiff-jointed, but with keen dark eyes which, a little later, fixed themselves inquiringly on my face and then clouded with acute disappointment. On either side his sons helped him with a hand beneath his arm-pits, and he himself walked by means of a great stick. The crowd of hangers-on stopped respectfully below, but these four climbed up to the dais. A stool

was brought for the old man, but at first he would not sit. He stood there, staring at me and shaking his head. 'It is not he,' he said, 'it is not he. Yet he is like, very like. But it is not he.'

"I was still perplexed at all this, but by this time a little amused. Nevertheless I hid that, for the old fellow was so plainly disappointed.

"'Come, father,' I said. 'I am very sorry, but will you not explain? Perhaps it is a brother of mine whom you have seen. Seat yourself and tell me about it.'

"He did not seem at once to comprehend, but when his sons had persuaded him to sit, he made a peremptory motion with his stick towards the old councillor who had spoken before. This individual glanced at the chief for permission, and having received it, told me this story at considerable length.

"He said that, very many years before, in the time of the late king, the village had been one day thrown into a state of great excitement by the advent of a stranger. This had been Mwezi, at the time a man of middle age. He had come from the south and west—from Central Africa, that is—and he had said that he was seeking a white man whom it had been shown him he should find in that village. Pressed for details, he announced that he had come from a town far away by a wide river where there were great falls over whose rocks the water thundered night and day in a perpetual cloud of spray. One night he had awakened in his hut, and had seen a white man standing before him dressed in a black robe, a string of beads, and carrying a book. Behind the white man he could see, as

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it were, the vision of a town, a river, a precipice—in short, what he now saw to have been Mtakatifuni. The figure had beckoned him solemnly, and he had sat up in his bed in fear. It had beckoned again, and had then pointed north and east, and at that the vision had died away before the startled sleeper's eyes. But Mwezi understood. In his mind there had been no question as to what he must do. In the dawn he had risen, said good-bye to his wife and family, and set out. For two years he had journeyed, wandering from place to place, scarcely knowing whither he went save that it was always north and east. The very wild beasts had respected him, and men, seeing the vision in his eyes, had withheld their hands from him. At length, then, he had reached Mtakatifuni. There, as always, he had inquired for his white man, and, hearing that no white man had ever been there but convinced that it was the place of his dream, he sat down to wait. He had grown old waiting; had married, and had begotten sons and daughters. Now he was too old to move; all but too old to live; but still he waited. Still he believed he would see his white man again before he died; indeed, he could not die until he had seen. My coming had seemed to the whole place the fulfilment of his vision, but I was not the man. Mwezi was sure of that and no one doubted him. And maybe, now, added the councillor, he would never see him. That was all.

“Now I had been long enough in Africa to set little store by native dreams as a rule. The affair, then, seemed to me pathetic rather than interesting.

My eyes kept straying to the old fellow while the story was being told me, and I marvelled to think of the simplicity of his faith, the weariness of his journey into the unknown, and the tenacity with which he had clung to his obsession. That this man should have given his whole life to such a quest, and should now be so bitterly disappointed when a remote chance had brought it nearer realisation than had been in the least degree likely, was indeed certainly cruel. I therefore turned to him to make what amends I could.

“‘But, old Mwczi,’ I said as kindly as possible. ‘doubtless you are mistaken. It was but once that you saw the figure in your dream, and that years ago. You dreamt of a white man dressed as I. Well, I belong to a regiment of white men who dress alike, and for many lives it has been the custom of that regiment to dress so. Doubtless as a boy you had seen one of my brethren, or perchance a picture of one, and your spirit saw him again in a dream. If I am right, and your home is on that great river which we white men call the Zambesi, then it is not unlikely that such a thing happened. Perhaps you have forgotten. Now in me you see him whom you seek.’

“The old fellow’s keen eyes flashed angrily. ‘The white stranger mocks me,’ he said.

“I protested. ‘No, father, I do not mean to mock you. Why should I do so? But come now, can you describe the face of the man you saw?’

“‘I can, and easily. His beard was white and not as thine. Moreover, he was bald-headed, and beneath his right eye was there a little scar such as

## THE PRIEST'S TALE

he had perhaps received in the hunt from some beast or the other. His face was long and thin, and his nose bigger. Am I a child that I should not know one man from another? Thou art not he.'

"It was foolish of me, but I was surprised out of all caution. 'How could you see so much in the dark of your hut?' I exclaimed.

"Mwezi rose to his feet and made a pathetic effort to hold his head erect. With true native dignity, he ignored me and turned to the chief. 'With the leave of the chief, I go,' he said. 'I am old and would rest in my place. Fare thee well, father of thy people. The Heavens guard thee. Be in peace.'

"I realised that I had blundered, but at the moment there was nothing to do. We watched the procession move away again almost in silence, and I noticed curiously that the crowd were even more interested in Mwezi than in myself, a white stranger. When he was out of sight, I apologised to the chief, who, however, would not hear that I had done any wrong. He himself showed me back to the house set apart for us and invited me to feast with him in the evening. He gave me leave to speak to his people, and I remember that I was so dog-tired that I lay down at once and slept for the rest of the day.

"In the morning, however, I remembered Mwezi, and told the chief that I would like to go and call on him. I determined to do what I could for the old fellow's peace of mind, and, with a guide and one of my own boys, we set out.

"The way led through the native huts and with-

out them. It was downhill going, as the village, in African fashion, was built on the side of a rise which culminated in the chief's hut, while Mwezi lived very close to the source of the river I have mentioned. We emerged through trees into a grassy open space of perhaps thirty paces wide, and I saw at once the old fellow sitting at the door of his hut beneath the shade of a wild vine which grew luxuriantly over the porch and roof. I was too much occupied in greeting him to take note at once of the building, but when we were seated, and he had been thawed out of his first coolness, I looked more closely at it. It interested me. It was long in shape, much longer than the usual native hut, and with three windows narrow and pointed, one of them now roughly blocked with sods. I examined the stones of the walls, getting up to do so. They struck me as being old and much more carefully laid than is usual in native work.

“ ‘Did you build this house yourself, old man?’ I asked. ‘It is well made.’

“ ‘I did not build it,’ he said. ‘I found it here. When I came to Mtakatifuni, it was empty and had been empty for long. There was no roof to it in those days, and few came near the place. But that suited me. My mind was full of him whom I had seen, and my spirit told me that I should await him here. The father of the chief then gave it me, no councillor knowing aught about it.’

“ ‘And you planted this vine and cleared this space, perhaps?’



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“ ‘ I did not. I did but train the vine which had blocked the door, and cut down for the wood of the roof the young trees that had grown here. But some other had cleared the ground before me.’

“ ‘ Would you mind if I looked within, Mwezi ? ’ I questioned, for to tell you the truth my curiosity was thoroughly aroused.

“ The old fellow got up courteously. ‘ Enter, white man,’ said he. ‘ My sons shall bring the stools and fetch us beer. I am old and poor, but you are welcome. You are at least of the people of him I saw, and shall I, in my sorrow, forbid you to come in ? ’

“ We entered. The place was divided into two by a sod partition, plainly recent in construction, and I looked disappointedly at what I could see. There were the usual scant furnishings of a native hut—a *kitanda*, some pots, a stool or two, a few spears in a corner. But when I passed round the partition, my interest increased tenfold. I even cried out in my astonishment.

“ I saw what I had not been able to see from the fact of my approach from the west of the clearing. The eastern end of the hut was not built squarely as the other, but roughly rounded in what elsewhere I should unhesitatingly have called an apse, and since on either side there were still visible a couple of those narrow pointed windows, while the floor space was practically empty, the suggestion of a chapel was complete. I ought, perhaps, to have guessed it before, but the thought burst on me suddenly. The situation, near the stream rather than up on the hill, the orientation,

the unusual length, the vine, the clearing—everything pointed in the same direction. And then the old man's story. I was frankly amazed.

"I turned and saw him standing in the doorway, his hand on the mud wall for support, his eyes peering at me from his bowed head. If I had been momentarily suspicious of a knowledge hitherto kept from me, all fled at the sight of him. He was transparently honest and eager. 'What is it, white man?' he quavered.

" 'Mwezi,' said I, 'here is a strange thing and a wonder. You tell me that you saw in your vision a white man, and I know from what you say that he was a priest. You travelled far, and your spirit sent you here. Well, I do not doubt that this house of yours was once a place of worship, and I think it was built by white priests. Think now, have you heard of no such thing?'

"He swayed a little as he stood, and did not answer at once. Then he slowly shook his head. 'I have heard nothing, nothing,' he said. 'If it be so, none know of these things, white man. Art thou sure? Thou wouldst not mock me again.'

" 'Mwezi,' I cried eagerly, 'I do not mock you. Why should I do any such thing? I cannot yet tell certainly, but this place is such as we build for prayers, and we may yet make sure. May I search more diligently?'

" 'Do what thou wilt, my son,' said he, 'and if my hands cannot, my spirit will help thee.'

"There and then I began a close scrutiny. I went outside, measured, tapped, sought, but I

## THE PRIEST'S TALE

found nothing more. If there had ever been a stoup, a cross, a rude piscina, they had long since gone. But the more I searched, the more sure grew my conviction that the place had been a chapel. At last I sat down to rest, and while resting, I had an idea.

" 'Mwezi,' I said, 'have you ever dug up the floor?'

" He shook his head. 'Why should I dig it up?' he asked.

" 'Would you allow me to do so?' I queried.

" He looked doubtful. 'But why?' he asked again, suspiciously. 'And would you do even now?'

" I laughed. 'Well, not at once,' I said. 'We must find a new house for you first. But if I am right, it may be that things are buried here, or that there are stones which will tell me a tale. See, the floor is higher now than it was. There was a step here at the door, and the mud has nearly covered it.'

" 'It is but the smearing,' he said, half contemptuously.

" That roused me. Of course I know the native habit of cleaning a house by putting down a fresh layer of mud mixed with a little dung, which in time raises the floor considerably. But I was not to be put off by that. Below the smearing of the old man's time might be a layer of earth thrown in to hide something. I glanced round. 'May I borrow a spear?' I asked.

" He nodded, and I selected one from the corner with a long thin blade. Then I went into the

inner room, and he came and stood again to watch me with his peering old eyes. Under his scrutiny, I began in the apse and thrust downward as far as I could. The blade sank to its hilt fairly easily, and that was all.

"Thus I stabbed until I came to the string of the apse, and then, almost at once, I made a discovery. The point of the blade struck a stone. A foot to the left, it touched again, and a foot more. In a few minutes I was all but certain that a stone slab was buried there. You may imagine my excitement.

"Mwezi called his sons and sent one for a native hoe. When he returned, we all gathered about the place while he slowly dug up the trampled mud. In a few minutes a stone slab was being exposed to view, and with my spear I got to work scraping off the earth while he dug free the other end. Suddenly, as I scraped, I made out a cross, and to cut the story short, we laid bare at length what had undoubtedly been an altar-stone. Every one of the five crosses were plainly visible, and left no room for question.

"We stopped out of breath, and I explained something of its use. At that Mwezi spoke suddenly, calling our attention to him. 'Lift it, lift it,' he cried. 'Lift it at once.'

"The old man was a striking spectacle. His withered face was simply alive with emotion. He was kneeling on hands and knees, and his thin fingers worked at the edge of the slab. Something in his voice compelled us, and we got at once to work. After all it was an easy task, for it was soon

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apparent that the stone was fitted into brick, with which the whole place was paved, and with spade and spear we levered it up a little. Then two of Mwezi's sons got their fingers under it, and without any great effort raised it completely. They staggered aside with it and the rest of us peered within. For a second we looked, and then Mwezi gave a great cry.

"My father, my father! Lo, I have come to thee, as thou didst bid. These many years have I waited, for my spirit spoke true, bidding me rest above thee. Now will I pass on whither thou art passed, and as thou hadst understanding, so it shall befall. Lo, I come to thee, seeking peace!"

"His voice hesitated, and failed, and he fell forward very gently and slowly till his head rested on his hands on the edge of the tomb. None of us dared to move for a few seconds, for Mwezi's voice rang so truly and convincingly. Great awe fell on us all, for he had spoken as one who certainly saw. Then I stretched out my hand and touched him, but he had gone, as he said. And on his face was peace.

"That is all there is to tell in a way. For inside the grave, if grave it were, there was nothing at all that it was given to our eyes to see—not a bone, not a shred of a habit, nor book nor beads. If ever a body or treasures of any sort had been there, the receptacle had been rifled long before, and entirely forgotten. So there is literally no more to tell. Of course the affair made great excitement. The chief and all his people came to see, and came once again the day after when I

lowered Mwezi into the grave and replaced the altar stone. After that the door and the windows were blocked up at my request, against the day of the coming of the Faith once more to Mtakatuni. For that, the space about the sanctuary is to be kept clear of undergrowth, by order of the chief. For that old Mwezi waits beneath the altar, and maybe he whom he saw waits also."

The dinner bugle had sounded a few moments before Père Etienne had finished, and now we rose to go. We stood a second, and I gazed over the side at the star-shine on the water, for the night was fine. When I looked up, Père Etienne was staring out into the darkness, a far-away look on his face, but he must have felt my eyes on him, for he turned quickly and smiled. Possibly he read a question I rather wanted to ask, but did not dare. Anyway, he smiled, as I say, and shook his head. "I have lived too long in Africa to have theories, my friend," he said, "but to me the memory of Mwezi and his chapel is a very precious thing. We are all of us souls on pilgrimage, and we rarely understand why or how, or remember that we have a Guide. But I like to think in the end, the Good God willing, we shall find a hidden sanctuary and that we have been led to a place prepared."

\* \* \* \*

M. Lesueur threw down the second of the three translations with an exclamation of annoyance.

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Suppose the third were no better? Suppose he had been wasting his time on the lucubrations of literary English tourists? Alas! One of the drawbacks to his profession was the impossibility of short-cuts to knowledge. One never knew. He must read the third story, even though it leave him as unenlightened as its predecessors. Grimly and with an effort toward concentration he took up the final translation, the original of which read as follows :

### THE TALE OF MR. PETER BROWN CHELSEA JUSTICE

# THE TALE OF MR. PETER BROWN

## CHELSEA JUSTICE

By V. SACKVILLE WEST

THE first thing which attracted my attention to the man was the shock of white hair above the lean young face. But for this, I should not have looked twice at him : long, spare, and stooping, a shabby figure, he crouched over a cup of coffee in a corner of the dingy restaurant, at fretful enmity with the world ; typical, I should have said, of the furtive London nondescript. But that white hair startled me ; it gleamed out, unnaturally cleanly in those not overclean surroundings, and although I had propped my book up against the water-bottle at my own table, where I sat over my solitary dinner, I found my eyes straying from the printed page to the human face which gave the promise of greater interest. Before very long he became conscious of my glances, and returned them when he thought I was not observing him. Inevitably, however, the moment came when our eyes met. We both looked away as though taken in fault, but when, having finished his coffee and laid out



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the coppers in payment on his table, he rose to make his way out between the tables, he let his gaze dwell on me as he passed ; let it dwell on me quite perceptibly, quite definitely, with an air of curious speculation, a hesitation, almost an appeal, and I thought he was about to speak, but instead of that he crushed his hat, an old black wide-awake, down over his strange white hair, and hurrying resolutely on towards the swing-doors of the restaurant, he passed out and was lost in the London night.

I was uncomfortably haunted, after that evening, by a sense of guilt. I was quite certain, with unjustifiable certainty born of instinct, that the man had wanted to speak to me, and that the smallest response on my part would have encouraged him to do so. Why hadn't I given the response ? A smile would have sufficed ; a smile wasn't much to demand by one human being of another. I thought it very pitiable that the conventions of our social system should persuade one to withhold so small a thing from a fellow-creature who, perhaps, stood in need of it. That smile, which I might have given, but had withheld, became for me a sort of symbol. I grew superstitious about it ; built up around it all kinds of extravagant ideas ; pictured to myself the splash of a body into the river ; and then, recovering my sense of proportion, told myself that one really couldn't go about London smiling at people. Yet I didn't get the man's face out of my head. It was not only the white hair that had made an impression on my mind, but the unhappy eyes,

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the timidly beseeching look. The man was lonely, I was quite sure of that ; utterly lonely. And I had refused a smile.

I don't know whether to say with more pride than shame, or more shame than pride, that I went back to the restaurant a week later. I had been kept late at my work, and there were few diners ; but he was there, sitting at the same table, hunched up as before over a cup of coffee. Did the man live on coffee ? He was thin enough, in all conscience, rather like a long, sallow bird, with a snowy crest. And he had no occupation, no book to read ; nothing better to do than to bend his long curves over the little table and to stab at the sugar in his coffee with his spoon. He glanced up when I came in, casually, at the small stir I made ; then by his suddenly startled look I saw that he had recognised me. I didn't nod to him, but I returned his look so steadily that it amounted to a greeting. You know those moments, when understanding flickers between people ? Well, that was one of those moments.

I sat down at a table, placing myself so that I should face him, and very ostentatiously I took a newspaper out of my pocket, unfolded it, and began to read. But through my reading I was aware of him, and I knew that he was aware of me. At the same time I couldn't help being touched by what I knew I should read in his face : the same hostility towards the world at large, and towards myself the same appeal, half fearful, half beseeching. It was as though he said, aloud and distinctly, " Let me talk ! For God's sake let me

talk it out ! ” And this time I was determined that he should ; yes, I was quite grim over my determination. I was going to get at the secret that lay behind those hunted eyes.

I was in a queer mood myself ; rather a cruel mood, although the starting-point of my intention had been kind. I knew that my mood had something of cruelty in it, because I discovered that I was purposely dawdling over my dinner, in order to keep the man longer than necessary on the rack. Queer, the complexities one unearths in oneself. But probably if I had been an ordinary straightforward kind of fellow, I should never have had the sensibility to recognise in the first instance that the man wanted to talk to me. It's the reverse of the medal, I suppose.

He had finished his coffee, of course, long before I had finished my dinner ; he had squeezed the last drop out of the little coffee-pot, and I wondered with amusement whether he would have the moral courage to remain where he was now that his ostensible pretext was gone and that the waiter was beginning to loiter round his table as a hint that he ought to go. Poor devil, I could see that he was growing uneasy ; he shuffled his feet, and the glances he threw at me became yet more furtive and reproachful. Still I gave no sign ; I don't know what spirit of sarcasm and teasing possessed me. He stood it for some time, then he shoved back his chair, reached for his hat, and stood up. It was a sort of defiance that he was throwing at me, an ultimatum that I should either end my cat-and-mouse game, or

let him go. As he was about to pass my table on the way out, I spoke to him.

"Care for a look at the evening paper?"

Absurd— isn't it?—that one should have to cloak one's interest in a stranger's soul under such a convention as the offer of a paper. Why couldn't I have said to him straight out, "Look here, what's the matter with you?" But our affairs are not so conducted. He accepted my offer, and stood awkwardly reading the *City News*, which I thought a sure indication of his confusion, as by no stretch of fancy could I imagine him the possessor of stocks or shares. "Sit down," I said, "while you read."

He sat down, with a mumble of thanks, laying his old black wideawake beside him on my table. I think he was glad of the paper, for it gave him something to do with his hands and his eyes. I observed him, and he must have known I was observing him. Underneath the thick, snow-white hair the face was young, although so sunken and so sallow, the face of a man of perhaps twenty-seven or eight, sensitive, not at all the face of a criminal escaping from justice, in spite of that hunted look which had been so vividly present to me during the past week. An artist, I thought; perhaps a writer; a romantic face; not blatantly romantic; no, but after you had delved into the eyes and traced the quiver of the mouth you discovered the certain signs of the romantic idealist.

"I saw you here last week," he muttered suddenly.

The little restaurant was by now almost empty ; many of the lights had been turned down, and at most of the tables the chairs had been tipped forward. Being privileged as an old and regular customer, I beckoned to the proprietor, and in a whisper begged that I might not be disturbed, as I had to hold a business conversation of some importance with my companion. At the same time I poured out for the stranger a glass of wine from my own bottle, remarking that the wine here was better than their coffee. This seemed to unloose his tongue a little, for he exclaimed that coffee was very bad for the nerves, especially strong, black coffee, as he drank it ; and after this short outburst relapsed again into silence, taking refuge in the paper.

I tried him once more.

" I don't remember seeing you here before last week? "

He shot me a quick look, and said, " I haven't been in London."

" Travelling, perhaps? " I hazarded negligently.

He gave a harsh shout of laughter, succeeded by the same abrupt silence. Would all our conversation, I wondered, be conducted on this spasmodic system? He certainly didn't second my efforts at small-talk. Was what he had to say too vital, too oppressive?

" I say," I resumed, leaning forward, " have I seen you anywhere else? I think your face is familiar. . . ." It was a lie ; I knew perfectly well that I had never seen him anywhere ; his was not an appearance to be lightly forgotten.

"And yet," I added, as he stared at me without speaking, "I am sure I should remember; one would remember this contrast"—and I touched first my face and then my hair.

"It has only been like that for a fortnight."

He brought out the words, scowling and lowering at me, and then the fierce look died away, to be replaced by a look of apology and pain; a cowed look, like that of a dog who has been ill-treated. "That is what made you notice me," he exclaimed; "it brands me, doesn't it? Yes. A freak. One might as well be piebald." He spoke with extraordinary vehemence, and, taking a handful of his hair, he tugged at it in a rage of despair; then sinking his face between his hands, he sat shaking his head mournfully from side to side.

"Listen," I said, "have you any friends?"

He raised his head.

"I had a few stray acquaintances. Nothing would tempt me to go near them now."

"Anyone to talk to?"

"Not a soul. I haven't spoken to a soul since—since I came back."

"Fire ahead, then," I said, "talk to me. You don't know my name, I don't know yours. You're quite safe. Say whatever you like. Go on. I'm waiting."

He began, talking in a voice low, rapid, and restrained. He spoke so fluently that I knew he must often have rehearsed the phrases over to himself, muttering them, against the day when he should be granted expression. "I had two friends.

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They were very good to me. I was homeless, and they told me to look on their home as my own. I hope I didn't trespass too much on their hospitality, but I fell into the habit of wandering into their house every evening after dinner, and staying there till it was time to go to bed. I really don't know which I cared for most, in those early days, the man or the woman. It had been with him that I first made acquaintance ; we were both engaged on journalistic work, reporting, you know, on different papers—and we came across each other once or twice in that way. He was a saturnine, queer-tempered fellow, taciturn at times, and at other times possessed by a wry sense of humour which made him excellent company, though it kept one in a state of alert disquiet. He would say things with that particular twist to them which made one look up, startled, wondering whether his remark was really intended to be facetious or obscurely sinister. Thanks to this ambiguity he had gained quite a reputation in Fleet Street. You can imagine, therefore, that I was flattered when he singled me out; I listened to all his remarks with a respect I was too proud to betray ; although I adopted an off-hand manner towards him, I didn't lose many opportunities of letting the other fellows know, in a casual way, that I had been practically given the run of his house ; and I was never sorry to be seen when we strolled off with his arm in mine.

“ They lived, he and his wife, in a tiny house at the end of Cheyne Walk. On misty evenings we used to sit, all three, on the sill of the bow-

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window, watching the big barges float by, while our legs swung dangling from the high sill, and we talked of many things in the desultory way born of easy intimacy, and I used silently to marvel at the sharpness of his mind and the gentleness of hers. She was very gentle. It even irritated me, faintly, to observe her complete submission to him. Not that he bullied her, not exactly. But he had a way of taking submission for granted, and so, I suppose, most people accorded it to him. It irritated me to see how his wife had subdued her personality to his, she who was of so tender and delicate a fibre, and who more than anyone wanted cherishing, instead of being ridden down, in that debonair, rough-shod way of his, that, although often exasperating, still had something attractive about it. She and I used to discuss it sometimes, in the evenings, when he was kept out late at his job—it's an uncertain business, reporting—we used to discuss it with the tolerance of fond people, and smile over his weaknesses, and say that he was incorrigible. All the same, it continued to irritate me. Sometimes I could see that he hurt her, when in his impatient way he swung round to devastate her opinions with those sly and unanswerable phrases that placed everything once and for always in a ridiculous light. What a devilish gift he had, that man, of humiliating one! And he did it always in so smiling and friendly a fashion that one could neither take offence nor retaliate. In fact, one didn't realise that one had been attacked until one felt the blood running warm from one's wounds, while



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he had already danced away upon some other quest.

"I can hardly trace the steps by which my admiration of him grew to affection, my affection to uneasiness, and my uneasiness to resentment. I only know that I took to flushing scarlet when I saw her wince, and to making about him, when I was alone with her, remarks that were less and less tolerant and more and more critical. My temper grew readier to bite out at him, my amusement less easily beguiled. I don't know whether he noticed it. Most probably he did, for he always noticed everything. If he did, then he gave no sign. His friendliness towards me continued unvarying, and there were times when I thought he really bestirred himself to impress me, to seduce me, he who was usually so contemptuous, and seemed to enjoy stirring up people's dislike. It wasn't difficult for him to impress me, if that was what he wanted, for he had, of course, a far better brain than my own; the sort of brain that compelled one's startled admiration, even when one least wanted to accord it. By Jove, how well he used to talk, on those evenings, when we sat and dangled our legs from the window-sill, looking out at the barges! The best talk I ever heard. You could have taken it all down in shorthand, and not a word to alter.

"Then he got a regular job which kept him out for three evenings a week, but he told me that mustn't make any difference to my habits: I was to drop in just the same, whenever I wanted to; and since I hadn't anywhere else to go, and since

the house had become a home to me, I took him at his word. In a way I missed him, on the evenings he wasn't there; although I could no longer pretend to myself that I was fond of him, he was a perpetual interest and stimulation to me, an angry stimulation, if you can understand what I mean, and I missed his presence, if only because it deprived me of the occupation of picking holes in him, and of making mental pounces for my own satisfaction upon everything he said. Not upon its intellectual value. That was above reproach. Only upon it as a signpost to his character. I took a delight in silently finding fault with him. But presently this desire passed from me, and I came to prefer the repose of the evenings I spent alone with his wife to the strenuousness of the evenings when we were all three together. We talked very little, his wife and I, when he was not there. She had about her an amazing quality of restfulness, of which I quickly got into the habit of taking advantage, after the vulgar, competitive days of a journalist's existence. You can't imagine what it meant to me, to drift into the seclusion of that little Chelsea room, with the mistiness of the trees and the river outside the window, to be greeted by her smile, and to sink into my familiar arm-chair, where I might lounge sucking at my pipe and watching the cool glimmer of her beautiful hands over the rhythm of her needle. Can you wonder that we didn't talk much? And can you wonder that our silence became heavy with the things we hadn't said?

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“Not at first. Our love-affair ran a course contrary to the usual ordering of such things. If it indeed ended in all the fever and pain of passion, it certainly began with all the calm of the hearth ; yes, I went through a long phase of accepting that room as my home, and that gentle woman as my natural companion therein. I don’t think I examined the situation at all closely at that time. I was more than content to let so pleasant an acquiescence take possession of me ; for the first time in my life, you understand, I was neither lonely nor unhappy. The only thing that jarred was *his* presence. The evenings when *he* was there were all out of tune. All out of tune.”

The man with the white hair paused to pour himself out another glass of wine ; and his voice, losing the dreamy note of reminiscence, sharpened to a more rapid utterance—a crescendo for which I had been waiting.

“I haven’t an attractive character,” he resumed ; “I don’t want you to think that I have, and so accord me more sympathy than I deserve. Please be quite impartial. Please realise that, according to ordinary standards, I played the part of a cad. Think : there was a man, ostensibly my friend, who had given me the run of his house ; I accept his hospitality and his friendship, and then take advantage of his absences to make love to his wife. Not a pretty story, although a commonplace one. Please be quite harsh towards me, and let me be quite harsh towards myself. I did none of the things I ought to have done under the circumstances ; I neither went quietly abroad without

making a fuss, nor did I attempt to conceal my feelings from her. If you knew her," he said, with an anguish of longing that lit up the whole story for me better than any words of his could have done, "if you knew her, you would realise at once that she wasn't a woman from whom one could conceal one's feelings. There was that calm gentleness about her which made all hypocrisy a shame and a sham. Also, deceiving her would have been like deceiving a child; hurting her was like hurting a child. (That was what enraged me when *he* hurt her, and I had to stand by, and listen.) She was so simple, and direct, and defenceless. So, you see, as soon as I realised what had happened, I told her. It wasn't a dramatic avowal, and it had no very immediately dramatic consequences. In fact, for a while its only effect was to bring me across the room from my habitual arm-chair, to sit on the floor near her with my head against her knee; and so we would remain for hours, not moving, scarcely speaking, for there was such harmony and such content between us that we seemed to know everything that passed in each other's minds.

"Of course, that couldn't last. We were young and human, you see; and standing in the background, overshadowing the perfection of our solitary hours, was his long, sarcastic figure—her husband and my friend. An impossible situation, when you come to consider it. The evenings that he spent at home very soon became intolerable, from every point of view. I grew so nervous with the strain of keeping a hold on myself, that

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even her tenderness could no longer soothe me. He didn't seem to notice anything amiss, and, you know, the funny, horrible, contradictory part was that, much as I now hated him, I was still conscious of his charm. And so, I think, was she. Can't you picture the trio in that little Chelsea room, while the barges floated by, and she and I sat on opposite sides of the fireplace, so terribly aware of one another, and *he* lay on the sofa, his long legs trailing over the end, discoursing in his admirable and varied way on life, politics, and letters? I wonder in how many London drawing-rooms that situation was being simultaneously reproduced?

"Why do I bore you with a recital so commonplace?" he exclaimed, bringing his fist down on the table; "are you beginning to ask yourself that? What have you to do with journalistic adulteries? Only wait: you shan't complain that the sequel is commonplace, and perhaps, one day, when you read in the papers the sequel to the sequel, you will remember and be entertained. He caught us red-handed, you see. It was one evening when we hadn't expected him home until after midnight, and at ten o'clock the door opened and he stood suddenly in the room. Squalid enough, isn't it? To this day I don't know whether he had laid a trap for us, or whether he was as surprised as we were. He stood there stock still, and I sprang up and stood too, and we glared across at one another. After a moment he said, 'Paolo and Francesca? this scene acquires quite a classic dignity, doesn't it, from frequent repeti-

tion?' And then he said the most astonishing thing; he said, 'Don't let me disturb you, and above all remember that *I don't mind*,' and with that he went out of the room and shut the door.

- "After that," said the man with the white hair, "I didn't go near the house for a week. This was at her request, and of course I couldn't refuse her. During that week she telephoned to me daily, once in the morning and once in the evening, always with the same story: she had seen nothing of him. He had not even been home to collect any of his clothes. You may imagine the state of anxiety I lived in during that week, which his disappearance did nothing to palliate, but rather heightened by leaving everything so mysterious and uncertain. She was evidently terrified—I could hear it in her voice—but implored me to keep away, for her sake, if not for mine. At the end of the week he appeared without warning in the office of the paper where I worked, and, greeting me without making any allusion to what had happened, invited me to come for two days' sailing in a small boat which had been lent him by a friend.

"I was startled enough by this incongruous suggestion, but naturally I accepted: you couldn't refuse such an invitation from a man who, you suspected, intended to have such a matter out with you on the open sea. We started immediately, and all the way down in the train for Cornwall he talked in his usual manner, undeterred by the fact that I never answered him. We got out at Penzance, the time then being, I suppose, about six o'clock

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in the evening. I had never been to Penzance before, but he seemed to know his way about, walking me briskly down to the harbour, where a fishing-smack under the charge of a rough-looking sailor was waiting for him. By now I was quite certain that he meant to have it out with me, and for my part, after the long uncertainty of the week, I asked nothing better than to get to grips with him. All I prayed for was a hand-to-hand struggle in which I might have the luck to tip him overboard, so I was rather dismayed when I saw that the sailor was to accompany us.

"We started without any delay, getting clear of the port just as the darkness fell and the first stars came out in a pale green sky. I had never been with him anywhere but in London, and it crossed my mind that it was odd to be with him so far away, off this rocky coast, in the solitude of waters; and I looked at the green sky above the red-brown sails of the fishing-smack, and thought of the barges floating down the river at Chelsea. They were ships, and this was a ship; they carried men, and this one also carried men. I looked at my companion, who sat in the stern holding the tiller. There was a breeze, which drove us along at quite a smart pace. 'Cornwall,' I said to myself, staring slowly round the bay and at the black mass of St. Michael's Mount, 'Cornwall . . .'

"I don't know how many hours we sailed that night, but I know that when the day broke we were out of sight of land. All that while we had not spoken a word, though to all practical purposes

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we were alone, the sailor having gone to sleep for'ard on a heap of nets, in the bottom of the boat. He was a rough, handsome, foreign-looking fellow, of a type I believe often to be found in that part of England. I couldn't understand the object of this sailing expedition at all. It seemed to me an unnecessarily elaborate introduction to the discussion of a subject which could as well have been thrashed out in London. Still, as the other man was the aggrieved party, I supposed that he was entitled to the choice of weapons; I supposed that his devilish sense of humour was at the bottom of all this, and I was determined not to give him the chance of saying I wouldn't play up. But why couldn't he tell me what was in his mind? How far did he mean to take me out to sea first? These questions and others raced through my mind during the whole of that night, while I sat back leaning against the sides of the boat, watching the stars pass overhead and listening to the gentle sip, sip of the water.

"At dawn my companion rose, and, shading his eyes with one hand while with the other he still held the tiller, he stood up scanning the surface of the waters. I watched him, resolved that it would not be me who spoke first. After a while he appeared to find what he was looking for, for he said, 'Nearly there.' I could see nothing to break the whole pale opal stretch of sunrise-flushing sea but a small black speck which I took to be a buoy, and the faint echo of its bell was borne to me through the clear air. He sat down again beside the tiller, and we sailed on in



the same silence, into the loveliness of the morning. I was quite certain that he had some sinister purpose, though what it was I could not yet imagine. What did he mean by that 'Nearly there'? Although he did not actually stir, he gave me the impression of concentration now, and at a word from him the sailor awoke and shot a rapid glance at me, as though doubtful whether he would find me still in the boat. I was beginning to wonder whether I should be a match for the two of them, when my companion, leaving the tiller, made a step towards me with a handkerchief he had drawn from his pocket; the sailor pinioned my arms from behind, and no sooner had I recognised the peculiar smell of chloroform than I was insensible and inert between them.

"It was very neatly done. I might have trusted him to carry out neatly whatever he undertook. Even over that he compelled my angry admiration. So neat! the fiend, the devil, he had got the better of me before I had had the chance to put up even the feeblest struggle. I curse myself now for my silly bravado in accompanying him when he asked me. I might have known I wasn't a match for him. But I'll be even with him yet," he said, his nervous hands fumbling at his collar, "I'll be even with him yet; I'll bide my time," and never was vindictiveness more savage in human eyes.

"He didn't allow me to come to my senses until he had carried out his purpose. When I opened my eyes I was *inside* the cage of the buoy, with the bell swinging gently to and fro above my head.

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Have you ever seen one of those buoys? They consist of a pear-shaped iron cage fixed on to a sort of platform, like the keel of a dinghy, and the bell hangs between four clappers at the top of the cage, and as the thing rocks up and down on the swell of the sea the clappers hit against the bell. There was just room for me to sit on the platform, crouched up inside the cage. One section of the cage was hinged to open, and the door thus formed was secured by a padlock; how he had got the key of it Heaven alone knows. I have tried to convey to you—haven't I?—that he was a very able and successful fellow.

“ When I came to, he was circling slowly round and round the buoy in his sailing-boat, lounging indifferently beside the tiller, and watching me with an expression of mockery I can't reproduce in words. I lost my head then; I leapt up and shook the bars of my cage and screamed to him to let me out. I can hear now in my ears the futility of my own voice screaming across the placid emptiness of the water. I must have looked like a trapped ape—the kind of ape that is most like a man. I shook the iron bars so violently that the whole of my floating prison jumped about, and the bell began to ring loudly. He only lounged and smiled. No doubt he had looked forward extremely to the moment. His amused impassivity was the thing best calculated to restore my self-control, and I try to salve my vanity by thinking that I should never so have gratified him but for the bewildering effects of the anæsthetic. I calmed myself down, I tried to reason with him,

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I exhorted him to settle up his wrongs in a more civilised manner. Then, seeing that every plea was to him a source of fresh delight, I ceased to argue, and became silent, holding on to the bars of my cage and watching him as he cruised slowly round and round the buoy. Presently he talked to me. They were like neat incisions in my flesh, his words. Oh, he spared me nothing, I assure you; there wasn't a phrase without a beautifully tempered edge to it. I recalled his words when he had caught us together, 'Don't let me disturb you, and above all remember that *I don't mind*,' and even in the midst of my rage and hatred I couldn't help respecting him for that irony.

"I learnt now the full extent to which he had minded. Quite coldly he told me. He had spent the week wondering whether it should be himself or me that should be put out of the way. So much had he minded, you see. I think he had been hurt in his pride, even more than in his affection for . . . for her. I hadn't suspected that he was so sensitive over what he considered his honour—dense of me, perhaps—but there was no mistaking that this sensitiveness now tied the extra lash on to the whip of his tongue. When he had finished talking, when he had said all that he wanted to say, and all without once losing his temper or his damned insolent dexterity, he nodded to me for all the world as though we had been talking shop in Fleet Street, and were separating to go about our various businesses. That nod remains with me; I'll never forget it or for-

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give it ; it seemed to me the last crowning insult ; it seemed to sum up all that I most hated in the man.

"He put his boat about, she heeled over a little as the breeze took her, and that slight slant of her sail was pencilled against the pale sky as she glided away across the water. I can't resist the journalistic touch, you see," he added, with an outburst of extraordinary bitterness.

"It was not until his boat had dwindled to a tiny black dot far away that I began fully to realise the situation. There was I, alone in the middle of a great circle of sea and sky, alone and confined, and ludicrously helpless. At first it was upon the ludicrous aspect that I chiefly dwelt, the anger of it, the absurdity, and the humiliation. Then little by little the horror of it crept over me, and I was aghast ; there was, of course, the gleam of hope that I might attract the attention of a passing ship, but the Channel at that point must be fairly on the way to becoming the Atlantic, and I dared not delude myself too boldly lest I be disappointed. He wasn't coming back for me ; he had made that quite clear. He had left beside me on the bottom of the buoy a parcel of food and a bottle of water, enough, he had said, to keep me for a week if I used it sparingly. He had said, with a grin, that I would be all right for a week if the weather kept calm. If not, he was afraid I might be inconvenienced. But he would like me to have a week, because that was exactly the length of time that he had had. Those had been his last words before he nodded and said, 'So long.'

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“ The whole of that day passed in a dead calm. I sat on the floor with my arms clasped round my knees, because there wasn’t room to stretch out my legs, and when I became too cramped in that position I stood up, which I could just manage to do if I stooped my head. Later on I found out that I could stand upright by putting my head inside the bell, but I couldn’t bear that for very long because of the intolerable noise of the clappers hitting the bell so near my ears. I tried holding the clappers still, but that was no good, as there were four of them. So I held the bell itself, which at least deadened the sound. No, I couldn’t unhook the clappers; they were a fixture. Anyhow, that first day I wasn’t much troubled by the noise of the bell, as the buoy rocked very slightly on an oily swell; I was more troubled by the dazzle of the sun on the water, not daring to shut my eyes for long lest I should miss a possible ship, and also I was divided between the gnawing of my thoughts and the boredom of those interminable hours from sunrise to sunset. I don’t suppose it is given to many men to have nothing better to do than watch the sun travel across the heavens from the moment it emerges above one horizon to the moment it dips below the rim of the other. That was what I watched—the delicacy of dawn, the blood-red of sunset, and the grand golden sweep of the journey in between the two.

“ Never had I felt so abandoned or so insignificant. Can your imagination enter into it at all? To do so, you must keep the sense of the enormous circle of sea always present in your mind,

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the hard round edge of the horizon, and the buoy in the centre like a speck of dust in the centre of a plate. I felt I was in a tiny prison in the middle of an enormous prison. And after the sun had gone it was worse ; it is true that I could no longer see that huge hard circle, but I knew that, although invisible, it was still there, and now in addition I had a black vault over me, and it grew cold, and a loneliness closed down on me such as I had not experienced while I had the sun and his warmth for companions. I dared not contemplate the prospect of many such days and nights ; I simply dared not let myself think. I tried to sleep, but was too cold. A breeze sprang up at about midnight, and the buoy rocked more noticeably ; again, I dared not picture my discomfort should the weather change. I called it discomfort ; I didn't know then, I hadn't yet begun to learn.

" Two days passed like that. Two whole days. Have you ever tried to spend two days, or even one day, or even twelve hours, doing absolutely and literally nothing ? If not, try it, especially if you happen to be an active man. I could only sit there, my knees drawn up and my hands either clasped round my knees or hanging between them. I was confronted all the time by the thought of what the end was to be. Starvation and death from thirst ? I could see very little other prospect. For the first day I had been comparatively sanguine that a ship would come along, but hourly this hope dwindled, till there was no real hope left, but only the old obscure and unreasoning human obstinacy. So on the second day I suffered

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from my thoughts ; I hadn't, as yet, undergone any real physical suffering.

"The morning of the third day broke with dark clouds over a grey sea. It was indescribably dreary. All that water, all that mass of grey water ! I huddled my knees up against my chest for warmth. A shower fell, and I minded that because it meant more water, not only because it chilled me ; don't think I exaggerate : the quantity and the monotony of so much water was getting on my nerves. They were in a pretty bad state by then, so bad that the dread of ultimate madness had already crossed my mind. I was weakened, too, by insufficient food, for I knew I must economise my resources. Once or twice steamers passed, a very long way off. I shouted till my throat was hoarse, but quite in vain. Each time they passed out of sight, I sobbed. Forgive me.

"The wind held, driving the masses of low clouds across the sky, and chopping the sea into little waves, white-topped amongst the grey, which tumbled and tossed the buoy till I was sickened and wearied. I fancied that the pulp of my brain was being shaken to and fro inside my head ; it felt like that. I prayed for the wind to go down, but it only gained in strength. I felt I should go mad ; I was so impotent, you see. And the bell clanged above my head—I was condemned to unceasing movement and unceasing noise."

He stared round him with tormented eyes, as though afraid that the whole restaurant would begin rocking and vibrating.

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“And there were other things, ridiculous and humiliating,” he resumed, “that robbed me even of the small consolation of tragedy. How can I tell you? I shall lose all dignity in your eyes—if indeed I ever had any to lose—as I lost it in my own. The terrible sickness, you understand. . . . That, and the din of the bell, and being flung up and down, backwards and forwards. No rest, not for a moment. I prayed, I tried to fight my way out of the buoy, between the bars, to throw myself into the sea. The sea was rising visibly, and the spray of the waves broke over me, drenching me; the salt dried upon my face, stiffening my skin. There were moments when I thought I could endure the rest, if I might have a respite from the movement; other moments, if I might have a respite from the sickness; and yet others, if I might have a respite from the clang of the bell. In the intervals of the sickness, with such strength as remained to me, I tore strips from my soaking shirt and tried to bind up the clappers; it muffled the noise a little, but not much. I wept from weariness and despair.

“It pursues me,” he said, again putting his head between his hands and shaking it with the same tired mournfulness; “at nights I think that my bed is flung up and down, and when I spring out the room reels round me as though I were drunk. There was no escape. It was no use trying to bend the bars of the cage, or to pull up the planks of the bottom. And the sickness, the sickness! It tore me, it shattered me, but never for a moment did I lose consciousness of the



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supreme humiliation it brought on me, and I supposed that he had foreseen this ; surely he had foreseen every detail. Secure in London, by now, he was surely rubbing his hands together as he thought of the derelict ceaselessly tossing up and down at sea." He gave a kind of snarl. " I pictured him, as no doubt he was picturing me.

" The real storm came next day, and I had to cling to the bars of the cage with both hands to save myself from being flung from side to side and broken against the iron. There were periods, I think, when I fainted from exhaustion, emerging incredibly bruised, and instantly in the grip of the sickness again. The buoy was hurled about, down into the grey valleys between the waves, drenched over and over with masses of water, as though some giant were flinging down enormous pailfuls ; indeed, it remains a mystery to me why I wasn't drowned. No doubt I would have been if the light platform hadn't floated like a cork. The bell was ringing wildly all the time. Every time I went down with the buoy I saw the sky tilting impossibly over my head, and the wave curling up above me before it smashed and fell, burying me beneath it."

He became silent, and sat for a long while heavily brooding to himself. Once or twice he closed his eyes, as though his thoughts were causing him intolerable pain. I knew that he was living again through all that racket and nightmare. I didn't say anything ; the thunder of the storm roared too loudly in my head for me to upraise my small voice against it, or to offer my

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tiny sympathy to that man whose endurance had been measured against the elements, and whose standard must be for ever after raised to the summit of their standard.

He let fall one or two phrases that seemed to open a rift down into the mirk of his experience, so that I thought I looked for a moment into the very night that he described :

" I had simply given up hope. I was so weak, you understand. By the time that night came I was just letting myself be thrown about, anyhow, quite limp, my head rolling and my arms flacking ; I must have looked like a man in a fit. Whenever I opened my eyes I saw the moon between the clouds rushing furiously down the sky, and rushing back the other way as another wave took me up again on its crest. The light of the moon was just sufficient to light up the rough and tumble of the inky hills of water. I remember thinking quite stupidly to myself that the moon was a dead world, and that I envied her for being dead. All this happened to me," he said, frowning across the table with sudden intentness, " the week before last."

This mention of human time brought me back with a shock from the fantastic world to which he had transported me.

" Hallo ! " I said, starting as one awakened, and making in my confusion a ridiculous remark, " it must be getting very late."

Only the ceiling light burnt in the little restaurant, which but for ourselves was deserted. The stranger leant over towards me, and a shiver

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passed over me at the nearness of this man whom I did not know, and to whose extraordinary experience I had, so to speak, by my own doing, been made a party. I wanted to put an end to it now, I wanted to say, "Yes, I have been very much interested. Thank you very much for telling me," and then to get up and go away. But at my first movement he detained me.

"Listen a little longer. I'm not mad, you know, and you needn't be afraid that I shall ever bother you afterwards. You don't know what good this has done me. I've been alone with this thing for a fortnight, nearly, thinking about it. The storm. . . . It lasted for two days; that made four days since I had been on the buoy. I think another day of storm would have killed me. There wasn't much life left in me by the time the sea began to go down. Two days of storm. . . ."

His voice trailed away. I think he felt, as I did, that the moment was over when he had really held all my attention and all my imagination. It was no good trying to revive it. I was tired, as though I had lived through some brief but violent mental stress.

"Two days of storm," he muttered vaguely.

"And how did you get away?" I asked; it was a perfunctory question.

"How did I get away.—Oh.—Yes, of course. A ship, on the seventh day. Yes, there were three days of calm after the storm; comparative calm, but for the swell. So I had the week he had intended for me to have, to the full. The ship's carpenter came alongside in a dinghy, and filed

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through one of the bars. I never told them how I came to be there. I said it was for a bet, and that I was to have been fetched by my friends the next day. When I got on board I collapsed. I'd just come out of hospital the day you first saw me here." He rose wearily. "Well, I mustn't keep you. Thank you more than I can say, for having listened."

It seemed strange that *he* should be thanking *me*.

We walked towards the door of the restaurant together; outside, the London street was empty under a melancholy drizzle of rain.

"You had better give me your name and your address," I said, pricked on to it by a curiously conventional conscience.

"No, no," he said, backing away from me. "You've been kind, you mustn't ever be implicated."

"Why, what are you going to do?" I cried.

He turned, his old wideawake crammed down over his hair, and his face half buried in the up-turned collar of his coat, but I saw the sudden gleam of his eyes by the light of a street lamp.

"Think out something worse to do to him," he mumbled rapidly; "something worse to do to *him*."

\* \* \* \* \*

As he read the last words M. Lesueur's brow darkened. A mare's nest indeed! An hour gone and nothing gained! Then his eye caught a footnote to the last page of the translation he had just perused.

"About the middle of this story" (the footnote said) "I found a few words in brackets that seem to have no connection with the tale. They are in French—foreigner's French and faulty—but they appear to mean: 'We are imprisoned in the garret, under the leads of the long wing of the château. Our food will last only another day.'" This laconic footnote was initialled "H. F. (translator)."

The Commissary's eye brightened. Here at last was something, and something good. Rapidly he made his plans. He would start in twenty minutes with six men; he would advise Tous-saint by telephone to meet him at the château with six more. The case would prove, perhaps, vastly important. He saw decorations and Paris employment; he read in imagination columns of praise in the great papers of the capital. Quitting unwillingly the realm of ambitious fancy, he took up the telephone, but before he could speak there came a sharp knock at the door, and a gendarme stood awaiting permission to address his superior.

"What is it?" demanded M. Lesueur.

"A tramp, sir," replied the gendarme.

"God in heaven, man! What do I care for a tramp? Is this a workhouse? Send him away and go after him!"

"He has found two Englishmen in a dungeon," observed the gendarme with wooden persistence.

"Let him join them!" snapped M. Lesueur, angrily. Then the next moment, "What do you say? Englishmen? Where? What dungeon?"

"He asks leave to make his deposition, sir. He is not an ordinary tramp."

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For a moment the commissary hesitated. The memory of those words interpolated in the third of the mysterious stories checked his impatience. Never neglect possible information.

"Bring him in," he said shortly, and replaced the telephone receiver that, all this while and to the intense irritation of the exchange, he had held vaguely in his hand.

There was ushered in a lean, scarecrow figure at whose heels (despite scuffling protests from the gendarme without) limped a black, untidy dog. The tramp bowed and began at once to speak in the slow correct French of a well-educated foreigner. He told of a dusty road along which he had toiled ; of a coppice and its tempting shade ; of the drowsiness of afternoon ; of dream voices that were not, after all, of dream ; of a mound with a mysterious grating ; of a subterranean cavern and its two unusual and impatient prisoners. M. Lesueur listened in silence. The story done, he took up the telephone once again. While waiting for his connection, he addressed the senior gendarme of those present in the room.

"I want the two fastest cars brought round immediately. This fellow shall take us to his mound and we will see how far he is lying and how far telling us the truth. We will then proceed to the Château de la Hourmerie. Six men will be required to accompany me. Make your selection——'allô ! 'allô !—— Toussaint ?—— Is that you, Toussaint ? "

And he outlined with curt efficiency the instructions laid down for his subordinate.

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"In an hour," he concluded, "we meet at the Château de la Hourmerie. One hour, mind you! One hour from now." Smartly and with finality he hung up the receiver.

The Commissary was already struggling into his dust coat when there came yet a second interruption. The sound of many agitated feet in the outer office prepared the occupants of M. Lesueur's private room for threatened but not for actual invasion of their retired sanctuary. Wherefore they regarded with speechless amazement the tempestuous entry of two elegantly gowned women, one clutching the other firmly by the arm, while in close and uncomfortable attendance followed two men, one tall, white-whiskered, and conspicuous in a buff alpaca suit, the other short, stout, and shining with the sweat-drops of embarrassment.

The female invaders lost no time in stating their business, but as they both spoke at once and shrilly, the unfortunate Commissary learnt little of the matter at issue between them. Not until the united efforts of all the men present had silenced feminine vociferation was it possible to understand what in the world the pother was about. The old gentleman, to whom in courtesy priority of speech was accorded, made the following statement:

"About an hour and a half ago I entered the Casino in company with the young lady whom now you observe in the grip of—er—the other lady. My companion, whose name is Amélie, was anxious at once to join the crowd at the tables.

We contrived to edge ourselves to a convenient front seat, and for some while played quietly and, with varying success. I then observed that new-comers were seeking to force a way to the front row of players, and, in order to give others their turn, stepped behind my companion, leaving vacant the spot I had previously occupied. It was filled forthwith by the second of the two ladies now before you, who thanked me with a charming smile for my courtesy, and was on the point of turning her interest wholly to the game when her eyes fell on Amélie. Instantly she flushed with excitement, paled again and flushed once more, and I was the next moment aware of a rapid movement of her arm as she snatched from the neck of Amélie an ornament that hung there from a thin gold chain.

"You can imagine the excited confusion that ensued, the outcome of which is my attendance here to account, so far as I may, for the disturbance in which I have been involved."

M. Lesueur acknowledged the straightforward simplicity of the old gentleman's story with a slight bow.

"Your name, sir?" he asked.

"Withershaw. I am an Englishman."

"Did you know any of these persons before this afternoon?"

"Yes and no. Yes—because the lady who assaulted Amélie in the Casino turns out to be the widow of a relative of mine, and her name, although not her person, is quite familiar to me. No—because my acquaintance with Mdlle



Amélie predated by an hour only our visit to the Casino. "This gentleman I have never seen before."

The Commissary suddenly recalled his waiting motor-cars, his telephoned appointment, his sensational prospects at the Château de la Hourmerie. Between him and the door of his room was an excited and perspiring crowd, not the least awesome members of which were the two angry ladies. By ill-luck his second in command was ill and away from work. Next in seniority came an official, competent enough to deal with ordinary cases of theft, disturbance, or general misdemeanour, but hardly to be trusted with an affair deserving of delicate and cautious management. M. Lesueur felt obscurely that the present was an affair of that kind. The parties to it were not only well dressed, but (with the possible exception of Amélie, whose social complacency the evidence of Mr. Withershaw appeared to have established) suggestive of good breeding, or at least of normal good behaviour. It would not do, thanks to the inexperience of a subordinate, to involve the Commissariat of St. Hilaire in unpleasantness with foreigners of influence and distinction.

With a sigh of impatience M. Lesueur turned again to his chair and sat down. He gave an order to the gendarme at his elbow :

"Telephone Toussaint that I am delayed, that I will be at La Hourmerie half an hour later than I said. Perhaps forty minutes. The cars can wait."

He spoke in a low voice, but not so low that the quick ear of Amélie did not catch the words "La

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Hourmerie." She compressed her lips, cast a look of spiteful triumph at her antagonist (who still held her arm as in a vice), and awaited developments in vengeful silence.

"Now!" said the Commissary briskly. "Your names, please. M. Withershaw—prénom? Thank you. M. *James* Withershaw. Yours, madame? Pardon? Spell it, please."

"D-A-N-E—trait d'union—V-E-R-E-K-E-R," said the captor lady, with precision and a very passable accent.

"Amélie Vildrac."

"Hector Turpin."

A clerk made the necessary entries. Mrs. Dane-Vereker was asked to give her version of the afternoon's events.

"They are few and easy to relate," she said. "This woman was my maid. Two days ago she stole, among other things, a valuable and valued cameo belonging to me, and disappeared. This afternoon, and by the merest hazard, I found myself next to her at the tables. With an effrontery natural to women of her type she was wearing the very ornament she had stolen. Naturally I charged her with the theft, and attempted to seize my property. That is all I have to say."

"And you, Mdlle Vildrac?"

Amélie shrugged insolent shoulders.

"Things have an air so different from different points of view," she observed. "Madame tells her story. I tell mine. Which will you believe? Here are the real facts. It is true, as Madame has said, that until two days ago I was Madame's maid."

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It is also true in effect that two days ago I left her. But not clandestinely, oh no! nor with stolen valuables. Rather at her bidding, and with a small trinket that she gave to me at parting. 'Amélie,' she said to me, 'I have planned to leave these people we are with'—you must understand, Monsieur, that Madame and I were members of a touring party under the charge of M. Hector Turpin yonder. Mon Dieu, how strange some of that party! English, all of them, and so strange!—But I was saying that Madame had planned to leave them. 'I am going away with M. Turpin,' she said to me, 'and these stupid people must extricate themselves as best they may from the trap into which my clever Turpin has led them. You will not betray me? Go you to Paris or to St. Hilaire and seek your fortune. Here is money and here is the cameo you have so often admired. Wear it in memory of me, and for its sake keep silence.' Voila!" Mdlle Amélie spread out emphatic hands. "Am I a thief? Is it theft to take gifts from another woman? And finally, M. le Commissaire, seeing that you are bound for La Hourmerie, I ask you to observe that this precious elopement took place from that very spot, and that in the Château de la Hourmerie were staying those other unfortunates, now abandoned to their fate by the selfish passion of Madame for her cicerone turned paramour!"

It may be imagined that Amélie's scandalous declaration let loose Babel once again in the office of the unhappy Commissary. Mrs. Dane-Vereker, Turpin, Amélie, and Mr. Withershaw voci-

ferated simultaneously and with prolonged fervour. The patience of M. Lesueur came finally to an end.

"Silence!" he roared, banging the desk in frenzy. And then to the attendant gendarmes, who, by now, numbered some twelve highly edified stalwarts, he shouted an order for the instant incarceration of these pestilent folk. Their fate should be decided on the morrow.

"As for you, Mademoiselle," he said to Amélie, "I know your type well, and I ask you to note that I am indeed bound for La Hourmerie. I shall not forget your story. Between this moment and to-morrow you will have time to think of the various embellishments of which it is susceptible."

And he hurried from the room toward the outer door, followed by six gendarmes, and, between two of them, the tramp, while from the office they had left came a confused turmoil of bitter feminine insult, of French official determination, of furious Anglo-Saxon protest. Baba, the black dog, bundled in his master's wake.

## II

On the terrace of the Château de la Hourmerie clustered a motley and excited group. In the centre M. Lesueur, his face alight with the satisfaction of a quest worthily fulfilled, gazed almost fondly at the body of rescuers and rescued that bore witness to his triumph. First was the tramp, impassive as ever, his whole bearing a slouch of

## THE NEW DECAMERON

uninterested fatigue. By his side—unshaven, a little dusty, but otherwise no whit the worse—stood the Professor and the Bureaucrat, salved from their underground prison by the crowbars of the six muscular policemen who formed at the present impressive juncture a stolid back-dropt to the scene. Close by, also unshaven and weary-looking, but happy in the moment of release, were a priest, a poet, and a nondescript young man of amiable aspect and engaging mien, whose name was Peter Brown. M. Lesueur had just completed his narrative of events at the Commissariat of Police.

“Good Lord!” said the Bureaucrat. “Fancy Mrs. Dane bolting with old Turps!”

“I shall never write another story on wall-paper,” remarked Peter Brown. “It’s worse than marking handkerchiefs. But we could make no one hear, and thought, if we hurled out of the window a bundle of paper with a message hidden somewhere in the middle of apparently harmless text, there was just a chance of its being picked up. The lane runs fairly near to yonder corner of the house. You can imagine how thrilled we were when the old envelope—weighted with Father Anthony’s pocket knife and my pipe stop—fell plump into a passing cart.”

“The chance was indeed providential,” commented the Priest gravely, “but let us not forget that we owe to our zealous and sharp-eyed friends among the police the actual discovery of our queer message hidden in the grass of the cross-roads.”

## THE COMMISSARY OF POLICE ●

“Where are the others of the party?” broke in the Bureaucrat. “We know that Turpin and Mrs. Dane and that minx Amélie are in jail. But where are Miss Pogson and Doctor Pennock and Mr. Scott, and where’s old what’s-his-name, the Master Printer? . . .”

## END OF PART III



## PART IV.—AS YOU WERE

THE reply was unexpected. Somewhere at the back of the château a clock struck noisily. In their basket chairs on the terrace of the Château de la Hourmerie the members of Mr. Hector Turpin's first Continental touring party sat spellbound at the force of a chime hitherto unnoticed. They had counted twelve strokes. To their horrified amazement, the chime rang out once more—and they realised that the tall windows of the house no longer threw comforting light upon the flagstones, that behind them, as before, lay utter darkness.

Seven voices spoke as one :

“ Did you hear it ? The clock struck thirteen ! ”

And again :

“ Did you see, the way the lights went out ? ”

For a moment there was profound silence. Then from the last chair of the line came a long-drawn, chuckling laugh, a laugh of pride, of amusement, of relief.

“ Well, upon my word ! ” said in quiet, incisive tones the voice of Henry Scott (of the Psychical Research Society). “ I hardly dared to hope for so complete a triumph ! My good friends, it is one a.m. As the clock struck twelve you sank



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into hypnotic trance ; on the point of its striking one, you emerged. The hour of interval was telescoped in your waking consciousness to a few seconds. As for the lights—at half-past twelve Doctor Pennock went to bed. She turned them out as she passed through the house. I asked her to. I will relight them now.”

And he walked to the nearest window, crossed the room within and switched on every lamp.

The bemused wits of the victims of Mr. Scott's hypnotic joke could not immediately respond to this sudden revelation of the truth. Also their eyes blinked in the new brilliance of projected light. Mrs. Dane-Vereker was the first to recover speech.

“ But where is that wretch Amélie ? ” she gasped.

“ And the Commissary ? ” demanded Father Anthony.

“ And the Old Gentleman ? ” echoed the Courier.

“ Turpin, by the lord Harry ! ” shouted the Bureaucrat. “ But you've eloped with Mrs. Dane ! ”

“ The guile of an enemy detained me in a damp and poorly ventilated cave,” complained the Professor.

“ There was a tramp here with a dog ! ” moaned the poet.

“ The terrace was crowded with police ! ” cried Peter Brown, “ and it was still daylight ! . . . ”

Mr. Scott enjoyed their bewilderment with the cruel calm of the true psychological investigator.

“ You will never see any of those people again,” he observed quietly. “ Except poor Amélie, who

AS YOU WERE ●

is in bed this three hours, I invented them "all. Not a bad set of creations, were they?"

A snore from the shadow drew attention to the stertorous oblivion of Mr. Buck, the retired master printer.

"Buck was my only failure," said the psychical researcher. "He was fast asleep when I started in. I say nothing of Doctor Pennock; she was too much for me; but then she knows the game. Nevertheless, she had the sportsmanship to leave me at it."

By this time signs of considerable indignation were visible among the dupes of Mr. Scott's inventive skill. The Lady of Fashion recalled with blushing fury her supposed escapade with the absurd Courier. The Bureaucrat re-lived his angry helplessness behind the iron grille. Before, however, anger could break out, the tension gave way to the irrepressible humour of Peter Brown. Suddenly he began to laugh, and each moment he laughed more loudly and more shamelessly. One by one the others joined, until by the healthy wind of merriment every trailing wisp of irritation was dispelled and blown away. Mr. Scott rose to his feet.

"You are admirable folk," he said, "the whole collection of you! I am proud to be associated with so unselfish and humorous an assembly. Let me make some slight amends for my impertinence. • In the first place, I would ask your pardon for subjecting you without warning or permission to a most interesting experiment. In the second place, let me tell you a tale against myself, a tale

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that shows me in the light of a bewildered, blundering fool. I had never, until the complete success of the unwarrantable trick I have just played upon you excellent people, really recovered from the depression of this adventure. It will discipline my vanity to tell the story, for I can hardly think of it without nervousness. Surely, by the time it has been made verbally public, I shall be chastened as befits simple humanity."

# THE PSYCHICAL RESEARCHER'S TALE

## THE SCEPTICAL POLTERGEIST

By J. D. BERESFORD

THERE was once a time (he began) when I decided that I was a fraud ; that I could not be a psychical researcher any longer. I determined to give it all up, to investigate no more phenomena nor attend another séance, nor read a word about psychical research for the remainder of my life. On the contrary, I planned an intensive study of the works of the later Victorians, of that blissful period in the history of Europe when we could believe in the comforting doctrine of materialism. " Oh ! " I thought, " that one had a Haeckel or a Huxley living now to console us with their beautiful faith in the mortality of the soul ! " The Neo-Darwinians failed to convince me ; the works of H. G. Wells left me cold.

I will tell you the events that brought me to this evil pass.

It is not likely that anyone here will remember

## THE PSYCHICAL RESEARCHER'S TALE ♣

the Slipperton case. It attracted little attention at the time. In 1905 there was still a little sanity left in the world. A few even of the London dailies were nearly sane then, and refused to report ghost stories unless they were known to be untrue. And the Slipperton case had hardly any publicity—an inch in the *Daily Mail*, headed "Family Evicted by Ghosts," was the only newspaper report that I saw; though there may have been others. In these days the story would be given a couple of columns opposite the leader page; and the Sunday papers . . .

I was connected with the thing because Edgar Slipperton and his wife were friends of mine; quiet, old-fashioned people who believed that when you were dead you *were* dead, and that that was the end of it.

The phenomena that drove them out of their house at last were of the ordinary poltergeist type that date back to the days of John Wesley. The Slippertons had a fat and very stupid cook, whom I suspected of being an unconscious medium; but they were so attached to her that they refused to give her notice, as I strongly advised them to do. They told me that although she was constitutionally unable to grasp a new idea, such as the idea of a different pudding, she was entirely dependable, always doing the same things in the same way and with the same results. And while this confirmed my suspicions that she was a spiritualistic medium, I recognised that she might have useful qualities as a cook.

The Slippertons stood it pretty well for a time.

At first they were only mildly inconvenienced. Things used to disappear mysteriously, and turn up in unexpected places. Slipperton's pince-nez, for example, were lost, and found inside the piano. And Mrs. Slipperton's "false front" would be moved in the night from the dressing-table to the brass knob of the bed-post, even after she took to pinning it to the toilet cover. Things like that; irritating, but not really serious.

But the trouble increased, grew to be beyond endurance in the end. The poltergeists, with that lack of imagination which always characterises them, started to play the old trick of pulling off the Slippertons' bed-clothes in the middle of the night—one of the most annoying of the spirits' antics. And they followed that by experimenting with the heavy furniture.

I was out of England when the trouble came to a head, and I heard nothing of the later developments until after the Slippertons had left the house. I happened to meet Slipperton by accident in the Haymarket, and he took me into his club and gave me the whole story. Naturally, I was glad of the chance to investigate, although I thought it very probable that the phenomena would cease with the departure of the cook. I determined, however, to go down and spend a week in the house, alone. I was not dismayed by the fact that I should be unable to get any help with my domestic arrangements, owing to the superstitious fears of the villagers. I rather enjoyed cooking my own meals in those days.

It was fine weather in late May when I went

down, and I regarded the visit as a kind of holiday rather than as a serious investigation. Nevertheless, from force of habit I carried out my inquiry in the scientific spirit that is so absolutely essential in these matters. The Slippertons' house was on the outskirts of a small town in Buckinghamshire. The shell of the house dated from the early seventeenth century. (You will find it described in the *Inventory of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments*—the second volume of the Buckinghamshire survey.) But the inside had been gutted and replanned to suit our modern requirements, such as the need for making each bedroom accessible without passing through other bedrooms, the necessity for a fitted bathroom, and so on.

I found the house as Slipperton had warned me that I should, in a chaotic condition inside. Everything movable seemed to have been moved—without any definite intention, so far as I could see, but just for the sake of upsetting the decent order of the household. I found a frying-pan, for instance, hung on the hook that was designed for the dinner-gong, and the gong inside one of the beds. A complete set of bedroom ware had been arranged on the drawing-room table; and apparently some witticism had been contemplated with a chest of drawers, which had become firmly wedged into the angle of the back staircase. In short, the usual strange feats that characterise poltergeist phenomena.

I touched none of these misplaced things with the exception of the frying-pan, which I needed

to cook the sausages I had brought with me; but after I had had my meal, I went through all the rooms and entered the position of every article in a large note-book, making plans of each room, besides a full list of the furniture and ornaments it contained. Later, I went up into the roof and disconnected the water supply, afterwards emptying the cistern and all the pipes. And before I went to bed I turned off the electric light at the main switch. All these precautions, as I need hardly tell you, were absolutely essential. It might appear difficult to explain the moving of a large chest of drawers by the sound of water-pipes or the fusing of an electric wire; but the critics of psychical research have essayed far more difficult tasks than that, to their own entire satisfaction.

I went up to the bedroom the Slippertons used to occupy, a little before eleven o'clock. I had with me a couple of spare candles, a new note-book, and a fountain pen. I was even at that time, I may add, a highly trained researcher in every way, and was quite capable of taking a full shorthand report of a séance. I tried my pulse and temperature before getting into bed and found them both normal. So far, there had been no sign of any phenomena; and I was not at all nervous. Indeed, I may say that I have never been nervous with spirits.

I had brought the *Pickwick Papers* upstairs to read in bed—it is always as well to choose some book that has no kind of bearing on the subject of one's investigation—and I was in the middle of



the Trial Scene when my attention was caught by the sound of something moving in the room. I had left both windows wide open and the curtains undrawn, and I thought at first that an unusually large moth had flown in and was fluttering against the ceiling. I laid down my book, sat up and looked round the room, but I could see nothing. The night was very still, and the candle on the table by my bed burnt without a flicker. Nevertheless, the sound continued ; a soft, irregular fluttering that suggested the intermittent struggle of some feeble winged creature. It occurred to me that a wounded bat or bird might have flown into the room and might be struggling on the floor out of sight near the foot of the bed. And I was about to get up and investigate when the flame of the candle sank a little, and I became aware that the temperature of the room was perceptibly colder.

I picked up my note-book at once and made an entry of the circumstances, and the exact time.

When I looked up again, the sound of fluttering had ceased and the candle was once more burning brightly ; but I now perceived a kind of uncertain vagueness that was apparently trying to climb on to the rail at the foot of the bed. When I first saw it, it could not be described as a form. It had rather the effect of a patch of dark mist, with an irregular and changing outline, that obscured to a certain extent the furnishings of the room immediately behind it. I must confess, however, that my observations at this point were not so accurate as they should have been, owing to the sudden realisation of my stupidity in not having brought

a camera and flashlight apparatus. The Slipper-tons had prepared me for poltergeists, and I was, at that moment, distinctly annoyed at being confronted with what I presumed to be an entirely different class of phenomenon. Indeed, I was so annoyed that I was half inclined to blow out the candle and go to sleep. I wish, now, that I had. . . .

The Psychical Researcher paused and sighed deeply. Then producing a large note-book from his pocket, he continued, despondently :

I have got it all down here, and when I come to material that necessitates verbal accuracy, I should prefer to read my notes aloud rather than give an indefinite summary. In the first place, however, I must give you some idea of the form that gradually materialised ; of the form, that is, as I originally saw it.

It took the shape, I may say, of a smallish man, grotesquely pot-bellied, with very thin legs and arms. The eyes were disproportionately large and quite circular, with an expression that was at once both impish and pathetic. The ears were immense, and set at right angles to the head ; the rest of the features indefinite. He was dressed rather in the fashion of a mediæval page.

(The professor was heard to murmur, " The typical goblin," at this point, but made no further interruption.)

He sat with his feet crossed on the rail at the foot of the bed and appeared able to balance him-

## THE PSYCHICAL RESEARCHER'S TALE

self without difficulty. He had been sitting there for perhaps a couple of minutes, while I made various entries in my note-book before I tried the experiment of addressing him.

"Have you a message?" I asked. "If you cannot answer directly, knock once for 'No,' and three times for 'Yes,' and afterwards we can try the alphabet."

To my great surprise, however, he was able to use the direct voice. His tone was a trifle wheezy and thin at first, but afterwards gained power and clearness.

"I can hear you fairly well," he said. "Now do try to keep calm. It isn't often that one gets such a chance as this."

I will now read my notes.

MYSELF. "I am perfectly calm. Go on."

SPIRIT. "Will you try to answer my questions?"

The Researcher looked up from his note-book with a frown of impatience after reading these two entries, and said :

But perhaps I had better summarise our earlier conversation for you. There was, I may say, a somewhat long and distinctly complicated misunderstanding between myself and the spirit before the real interest of the message begins ; a misunderstanding due to my complete misapprehension of our respective parts. You see, it is unhappily true—however much we may deplore the fact and try to guard against it—that even in psychical research we form habits of thought and method,

but particularly of thought. And I had got into the habit of regarding communications from spirits as referring to what we assume to be the future life. Well, this communication didn't. The spirit with whom I was talking had not, in short, ever been incarnated. He was what the Spiritualists and Theosophists, and so on, call an "Elemental." And to him, I represented the future state. I was, so to speak, the communicating spirit and he the psychical researcher. He was, I inferred, very far advanced on his own plane and expecting very shortly to "pass over," as he put it. Also, I gathered that he was in his own world by way of being an intellectual; keenly interested in the future—that is, in our *present* state; and that the Slipperton phenomena were entirely due to the experiments he had been carrying out ("on strictly scientific lines," he assured me) to try and ascertain the conditions of life on this plane.

Perhaps I can, now, illustrate his attitude by a few quotations from our conversation. For example :

SPIRIT. "Are you happy where you are?"

MYSELF. "Moderately. At times. Some of us are."

SPIRIT. "Are you yourself happy?"

MYSELF. "I may say so. Yes."

SPIRIT. "What do you do? Try and give me some idea of life on your plane."

MYSELF. "It varies so immensely with the individual and the set in which one lives. But we—oh! we have a great variety of what we call

## THE PSYCHICAL RESEARCHER'S TALE •

'interests' and occupations, and most of us, of course, have to work for our livings."

SPIRIT. "I don't understand that. What are your livings, and how do you work for them?"

MYSELF. "We can't live without food, you see. We have to eat and drink and sleep; protect ourselves against heat and cold and the weather generally, which means clothes and shelter—garments to wear and houses to live in, that is."

SPIRIT. "I have inferred something of this very vaguely from my experiments. For instance, I gather that you put on hair in the daytime, and take it off when you are—where you are at the present time. Also, I have noticed that when the coverings which at present conceal you are pulled away, you invariably replace them. Am I to deduce from that that you try to keep your bodies warm and your heads cool at night?"

MYSELF. "Well, that's a trifle complicated. About the hair, you understand, some of us lose our hair—it comes out, we don't know why—in middle life, as mine has, and women and some men are rather ashamed of this and wear—er—other people's hair in the daytime to hide the defect."

SPIRIT. "Why?"

MYSELF. "Oh, vanity. We want to appear younger than we really are."

SPIRIT. "Why?"

The Researcher bent a little lower over his notebook as he said:

I seem to have written "Damnation" at this

point ; but so far as I can remember I did not speak the word aloud. You will see, however, that I tried my best to be patient in what were really the most exasperating circumstances. But I will miss the next page or two, and come to more interesting material. Ah ! here :

SPIRIT. " This thing you call death, or dying ? Am I to understand that it corresponds to what we call incarnation ? "

MYSELF. " We are not sure. Some of us believe that our actual bodies will rise again in the flesh ; others that the body perishes and the spirit survives in an uncertain state of which we have very little knowledge ; others, again, that death is the end of everything."

SPIRIT. " In brief, you know nothing whatever about it ? "

MYSELF. " Uncommonly little."

SPIRIT. " Do you remember your lives as elementals ? "

MYSELF (*definitely*). " No ! "

SPIRIT. " Then where do you suppose yourselves to begin ? "

MYSELF. " We don't know. There are various guesses. None of them particularly likely."

SPIRIT. " Such as ? "

MYSELF. " Oh, some of us believe that the soul or spirit is a special creation made by a higher power we call God, and breathed into the body at birth. And some that the soul or spirit, itself eternal, finds a temporary house in the body, and progresses from one to another with intervals between each incarnation."

## THE PSYCHICAL RESEARCHER'S TALE

SPIRIT. "Then this being born is what we should call dying?"

MYSELF. "Quite. It makes no difference. And, as a matter of fact, the overwhelming majority of us—that is to say, all but about one in every million—never bother our heads where we came from, or what's likely to happen to us when we die, or are born, as you would call it."

I have a note here that after this we were both silent for about ten minutes.

SPIRIT (*despondently*). "I wish I could get some sort of idea what you do all the time and what you think about. I thought, when I so unexpectedly got into touch with someone in the future state, that I should be able to learn everything. And I have, so far, learnt nothing—absolutely nothing. In fact, except that I have been able to correct my inferences with regard to one or two purely material experiments, I may say that I know less now than I did before. And, by the way, those things over there—he pointed to the washstand—I noticed that at certain times you go through some ceremony with them upstairs, and as I wished to discover if there was any reason why you should not perform the same ceremony downstairs, I moved the things. Well, I noticed that the spirit who was here before you was apparently very annoyed. Can you give me any explanation of that?"

MYSELF. "Our bodies become soiled by contact with matter, and we wash ourselves in water. We prefer to do it in our bedrooms."

SPIRIT. "Why?"

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MYSELF. "We use a certain set of rooms for one purpose and another set for other purposes."

SPIRIT. "Why?"

MYSELF. "I don't know why. We do."

SPIRIT. "But you are sure of the fact, even if you can give no reason?"

MYSELF. "Absolutely."

SPIRIT. "I wish I could prove that. One of my fellow-scientists, who has recently been able to press his investigations even further than I have up to the present time, has recently brought forward good evidence to prove that spirits are all black, wear no coverings on their bodies, live in the simplest of dwellings, and, although they have a few ceremonies, certainly have none which in any way corresponds to that you have just described."

MYSELF. "He has probably been investigating the habits of the Australian aborigines."

SPIRIT. "What are they?"

MYSELF. "Men, or, as you would say, spirits, like us in a few respects, but utterly different in most."

SPIRIT. "Have you ever seen them?"

MYSELF. "No."

SPIRIT. "Or met anyone who has?"

MYSELF. "No."

SPIRIT. "Then this account of them tallies with nothing in your experience."

MYSELF. "No, but they exist all right. There's no doubt of that."

SPIRIT. "I question it. In any case, I could not accept your word as evidence, seeing that you



## THE PSYCHICAL RESEARCHER'S TALE

have neither seen them yourself nor met with anyone who has."

And so on, you know (the Researcher muttered, flicking over the pages of his note-book).

He was infernally sceptical about those aborigines. It seems that he had had a tremendous argument with the other investigator about the possibility of "spirits" being black and naked, and he was dead set on proving that he had been right. I think, as a matter of fact, that what I said tended to confirm him in his theory. He put it that if there were such spirits on this plane, I must have seen them or have had some quite first-hand evidence of their existence; and when I said that I had seen black people, Indians, and so on, he cross-examined me until I got confused. You see, I had to confess that they weren't, strictly speaking, black, that they wore clothes, and washed, and lived in houses; and he got me involved in apparent contradictions—you have no idea how easy it is, when you are trying to be very lucid—and then he changed the subject with the remark that I was a very poor witness.

It was about this time that I began to lose my temper. It was after three o'clock when we got to that point, and I was getting very tired, and, strange as it may appear, curiously doubtful about my own existence. I had for some time been coming to the conclusion that he did not quite believe in my reality; and after he had dismissed my account of the black races as being untrustworthy, he said, half to himself, that quite probably I was nothing more than an hallucination, a thought pro-

jection of his own mind. And after that I got more and more annoyed—partly, I think, because I had a kind of haunting fear that what he had said might be true. When you have been talking to a spirit for over three hours in the middle of the night, you are liable to doubt anything.

But it was foolish of me to try and prove to him that I had a real objective existence, because obviously it wasn't possible. I tried to touch him, and my hand went through him as if he were nothing more than a patch of mist. Then I got right out of bed and moved various articles about the room, but, as he said, that proved nothing, for if he had an hallucination about me, he might equally well have one about the things I appeared to move. And then we drifted into a futile argument as to what I looked like.

It began as a sort of test, to try if my own conception of myself tallied with his; and it didn't—not in the very least. In fact, the description he gave of me would have done very well for the typical goblin of fairy-tale, which, as I told him, was precisely how *I* saw *him*. He laughed at that, and told me that, as a matter of fact, he had no shape at all, and that my conception of him proved his description of me was the correct one, because I had visualised myself. He said that he would appear to me in any shape that I happened to be thinking of, and naturally I should be thinking of my own. And I could not disprove a thing he said; and when I looked at myself in the cheval glass, I was not at all sure that I did not look like the traditional goblin.

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Well, I assure you that I felt just then as if the one possible way left to demonstrate my sanity, my very existence, was to lose my temper; and I did it very thoroughly. I raved up and down the room, knocked the furniture about, chucked my boots through him, and called him a damned elemental. And although it had no more effect upon him than if I had been in another world—as I suppose in a sense I actually was—that outbreak did help to restore my sanity.

Perhaps you may have noticed that if a man is worsted in an argument he invariably loses his temper? It is the only means he has left to convince himself that he is right. Well, my temper did that for me on this occasion. I could not prove my existence to that confounded spirit by any logic or demonstration, but I could prove it to myself by getting angry. And I did.

The Researcher glared round the circle as if challenging anyone there to deny the validity of his existence, then slapped his note-book together and sat upon it.

I do not expect you to believe my story (he concluded, with a touch of vehemence). Indeed, I would much sooner that you did not believe it. I have been trying to doubt it myself for the past eleven years, and I still hope to succeed in that endeavour, aided by my intensive study of the comforting theories of the later Victorian scientists. But I must warn you that there was just one touch of what one might call evidence, beyond

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my own impressions of that night—which may have been, and probably were, a mixture of telepathy, hallucination, expectancy, and auto-suggestion, that found expression in automatic writing.

This rather flimsy piece of evidence rests upon a conclusion drawn from the end of my conversation with the spirit. I was still banging about the room, then, and I said that I had finished with psychical research, that never again would I make the least inquiry with regard to a possible future life, or any kind of spiritualistic phenomenon. And, curiously enough, the poltergeist precisely echoed my resolve. He said that that night's experience had clearly shown him that the research was useless, that it could never prove anything, and that, even if it did, no one would believe it. *For if, as he pointed out, we who were in a manner of speaking face to face, were unable to prove our own existence to each other, how could we expect to prove the other's existence to anyone else?*

It was getting light then, and he faded out almost immediately afterwards.

But it is a fact that there were no more poltergeist phenomena in that house, although the Slippertons went back to it a month or two later and still have the same cook.

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## THE COMMISSARY OF POLICE

"Where are the others of the party?" broke in the Bureaucrat. "We know that Turpin and Mrs. Dane and that minx Amélie are in jail. But where are Miss Pogson and Doctor Pennock and Mr. Scott, and where's old what's-his-name, the Master Printer? . . ."

## END OF PART III